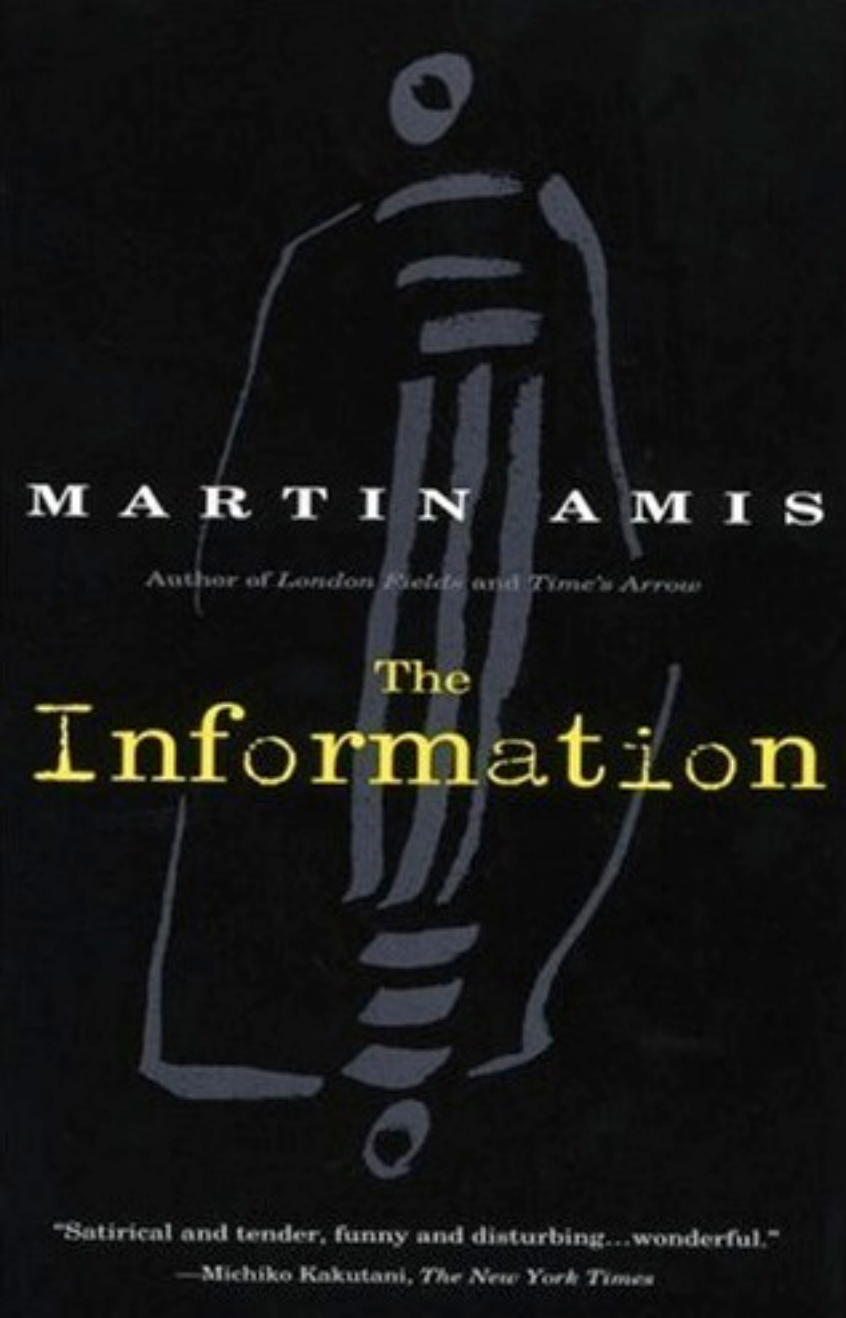

MARTIN AMIS

Author of *London Fields* and *Time's Arrow*

The Information

"Satirical and tender, funny and disturbing…wonderful."

—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

THE INFORMATION

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by MARTIN AMIS

Vintage International

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To Louis and Jacob

And to the memory of

Lucy Partington

(1952–1973)

PART *ONE*

After a while she too sighed and turned over, away from him.
There in the night their bed had the towelly smell of marriage.

He awoke at six, as usual. He needed no alarm clock. He was already comprehensively alarmed. Richard Tull felt tired, and not just underslept. Local tiredness was up there above him—the kind of tiredness that sleep might lighten—but there was something else up there over and above it. And beneath it. That greater tiredness was not so local. It was the tiredness of time lived, with its days and days. It was the tiredness of gravity—gravity, which wants you down there in the center of the earth. That greater tiredness was here to stay: and get heavier. No nap or cuppa would ever lighten it. Richard couldn't remember crying in the night. Now his eyes were dry and open. He was in a terrible state—that of consciousness. Some while ago in his life he had lost the knack of choosing what to think about. He slid out of bed in the mornings just to find some peace. He slid out of bed in the mornings just to get a little rest. He was forty tomorrow, and reviewed books.

In the small square kitchen, which stoically awaited him, Richard engaged the electric kettle. Then he went next door and looked in on the boys. Dawn visits to their room had been known to comfort him after nights such as the one he had just experienced, with all its unwelcome information. His twin sons in their twin beds. Marius and Marcus were not identical twins. And they weren't fraternal twins either, Richard often said (unfairly, perhaps), in the sense that they showed little brotherly feeling. But that's all they were, brothers, born at the same time. It was possible, theoretically (and, Richard surmised, their mother being Gina, also practically) that Marcus and Marius had different fathers. They didn't look alike, especially, and were strikingly dissimilar in all their talents and proclivities. Not even their birthdays were content to be identical: a sanguinary summer midnight had interposed itself between the two boys and their (again) very distinctive parturitional styles, Marius, the elder, subjecting the delivery room to a systematic and intelligent stare, its negative judgment suspended by decency and disgust, whereas Marcus just clucked and sighed to himself complacently, and seemed to pat himself down, as if after a successful journey through freak weather. Now in the dawn, through the window and through the rain, the streets of London looked like the insides of an old plug. Richard contemplated his sons, their motive bodies reluctantly arrested in sleep, and reef-knotted to their bedware, and he thought, as an artist might: but the young sleep in another country, at once very

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creation of a rabbit who lived in a racing car. This you could discuss. Richard didn't know what Gina believed. He knew less and less about her private cosmogony.

There she stood, in light lipstick and light pancake and light woolen suit, holding her teacup in joined palms. Other working girls whose beds Richard had shared used to get up at around eleven at night to interface themselves for the other world. Gina did it all in twenty minutes. Her body threw no difficulties in her way: the wash-and-go drip-dry hair, the candid orbits that needed only the mildest of emphasis, the salmony tongue, the ten-second bowel movement, the body that all clothes loved. Gina worked two days a week, sometimes three. What she did, in public relations, seemed to him much more mysterious than what he did, or failed to do, in the study next door. Like the sun, now, her face forbade any direct address of the eyes, though of course the sun glares crazily everywhere at once and doesn't mind who is looking at it. Richard's dressing gown bent round him as he fastened Marius's shirt buttons with his eaten fingertips.

"Can you fasten it?" said Marius.

"Do you want a cup of tea making?" said Gina, surprisingly.

"Knock knock," said Marco.

Richard said, in order, "I am fastening it. No thanks, I'm okay. Who's there?"

"You," said Marco.

"No, *fasten* it. Come on, Daddy!" said Marius.

Richard said, "You who? You don't mean fasen it. You mean do it faster. I'm trying."

"Are they ready?" said Gina.

"Who are you calling! Knock knock," said Marco.

"I think so. Who's there?"

"What about macks?"

"Boo."

"They don't need macks, do they?"

"Mine aren't going out in that without macks."

"Boo," said Marco.

"Are you taking them in?"

"Boo who? Yeah, I thought so."

"Why are you crying!"

"Look at you. You aren't even dressed yet."

"I'll get dressed now."

"Why are you crying!"

"It's ten to nine. I'll take them."

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genetic celebrity. She was beautiful, every inch, and she didn't change. She got older, but she didn't change. In the gallery of the old photographs she was always the same, staring out, while everyone else seemed disgracefully protean, kaftaned Messiahs, sideburned Zapatas. He sometimes wished she wasn't: wasn't beautiful. : his present travail. Her brother and sister were ordinary. Her dead dad had been ordinary. Her mother was still around for the time being, fat and falling apart and still mountainously pretty somehow, in a bed somewhere.

We are agreed—come on: we are agreed—about beauty in the flesh. Consensus is possible here. And in the mathematics of the universe, beauty helps tell us whether things are false or true. We can quickly agree about beauty, in the heavens and in the flesh. But not everywhere. Not, for instance, on the page.

: the van, Scozzy looked at 13 and said,

"Morrie goes to the doctor, right?"

"Right," said 13.

13 was eighteen and he was black. His real name was Bently. Scozzy was thirty-one, and he was white. His real name was Steve Cousins.

Scozzy said, "Morrie tells the doc, he says, 'I can't raise it with my wife. My wife Queenie. I can't raise it with Queenie.' "

Hearing this, 13 did something that white people have stopped really doing. He grinned. White people used to do it, years ago. "Yeah," said 13 expectantly. Morrie, Queenie, he thought: all Jews is it.

Scozzy said, "The doc goes, 'Unlucky. Listen. We got these pills in from Sweden. The latest gear. Not cheap. Like a ca r et a pill. Okay?' "

13 nodded. "Or whatever," he said.

They were sitting in the orange van, drinking cans of Ting: pineapple-grapefruit crush. 13's fat dog Giro sat erectly between them on the handbrake section, keeping still but panting as if in great lust.

" 'Take one of them and you'll have a stiffy for four hours. h bonk with a capital O.' Morrie goes home, right?" Scozzy paused and then said thoughtfully, "Morrie rings up the doc and he's like, 'I just took one of them pills but guess what.' "

13 turned and frowned at Scozzy.

" 'Queenie's gone shopping! Won't be back for four hours!' The doc says, 'This is serious, mate. Is there anybody else indoors?' Morrie says, 'Yeah. The au pair.' The doc says, 'What she like?' 'Eighteen with big tits.' So the doc goes, 'Okay. Stay calm. You'll have to do it with the au pair. Tell her it's an emergency. Medical matter.' "

"Medical matter whatever," murmured 13.

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To take a heftily looming instance, the house itself. Its mass and scope, its particular reach and sweep he knew well: for a year he had gone to school in an identical building across the street. The school, a cosmopolitan crammer, which was dead now, like Richard's father, who had scrimped to send him there, used to accommodate a staff of twenty-five and over two hundred pupils—an ecology of estrogen and testosterone, bumfluff, flares, fights, fancyings, first loves. That tiered rotating world was vanished. But now in a place of the same measurements, the same volume, lived Gwyn and Demeter Barry. Oh yeah. And the help . . . Richard moved his head around as if to relieve neck pain. The camera continued to stare at him incredulously. He tried to stare back at it, with mad pride. Richard wasn't guilty of covetousness, funnily enough. In the shops he seldom saw anything that looked much fun to buy. He liked the space but he didn't want the stuff you put in it. Still, everything had been so much nicer, he thought, in the old days, when Gwyn was poor.

Allowed entry, Richard was shown upstairs, not of course by Demeter (who at this hour would be unguessably elsewhere down the great passages), nor by a maid (though there were maids, called things like Ming and Atrocia, shipped here in crates from São Paolo, from Vientiane), nor by any representative of the home-improvement community (and they were always about, the knighted architect, the overalled stiff with a mouthful of nails): Richard was shown upstairs by a new type of auxiliary, an American coed or sophomore or grad student, whose straightness of hair, whose strictness of mouth, whose brown-eyed and black-browed intelligence was saying that whatever else Gwyn might be he was now an operation, all fax and Xerox and preselect. In the hall Richard saw beneath the broad mirror a shelf so infested with cardboard or even plywood invitations . . . He thought of the van outside, a month of tabloids wedged between dash and windscreen. And the two guys within, one white, one black, and the fat German Shepherd, more like a bear than a dog, with its scarf of tongue.

Gwyn Barry was nearing the climax of a combined interview and photo session. Richard entered the room and crossed it in a diagonal with one hand effacingly raised, and sat on a stool, and picked up a magazine. Gwyn was on the window seat, in his archaeologist's suit, also with archaeologist's aura of outdoor living, rugged inquiry, suntan. He filled his small lineaments neatly, just as his hair filled the lineaments (only a rumor, for now) of male-pattern recession. Gwyn's hair was actually gray, but bright gray: not the English gray of eelskin and wet slates; nor yet the gray that comes about through tiredness of pigment,

and dryness. Bright gray hair—the hair (Richard thought) of an obvious charlatan. Richard himself, by the way, was going bald too, but anarchically. No steady shrinkage, with the flesh stealing crownwards like rising water; with him, hair loss happened in spasms, in hanks and handfuls. Visits to the barber were now as fearful and apparently hopeless as visits to the bank manager, or the agent—or the garage, in the tomato-red Maestro.

"Have you any thoughts," the interviewer was saying, "on turning forty?"

"Happy birthday," said Richard.

"Thanks. It's just a number," said Gwyn. "Like any other."

The room—Gwyn's study, his library, his lab—was very bad. When in this room it was Richard's policy to stare like a hypnotist into Gwyn's greedy green eyes, for fear of what he might otherwise confront. He didn't really mind the furniture, the remoteness of the ceiling, the good proportion of the three front windows. He *reall* didn't mind the central space-platform of floppy discs and X-ray lasers. What he minded were Gwyn's books: Gwyn's books, which multiplied or ramified so crazily now. Look on the desk, look on the table, and what do you find? The lambent horror of Gwyn in Spanish (sashed with quotes and reprint updates) or an American book-club or supermarket paperback, or something in Hebrew or Mandarin or cuneiform or pictogram that seemed blameless enough but had no reason to be there if it wasn't one of Gwyn's. And then Gallimard and Mondadori and Livro Aberto and Zsolnay and Uitgeverij Contact and Kawade Shobo and Magveto Konyvkiado. In the past Richard had enjoyed several opportunities to snoop around Gwyn's study—his desk, his papers. Are snoopers snooping on their own pain? Probably. I expect you get many young girls who. You will be delighted to hear that the air tickets will be. The judges reached their decision in less than. These terms are, we feel, exceptionally. I am beginning to be translating your. Here is a photograph of the inside of my. Richard stopped flipping through the magazine on his lap (he had come to an interview with Gwyn Barry), and stood, and surveyed the bookshelves. They were fiercely alphabetized. Richard's bookshelves weren't alphabetized. He never had time to alphabetize them. He was always too busy—looking for books he couldn't find. He had books heaped under tables, under beds. Books heaped on windowsills so they closed out the sky.

Interviewer and interviewee were winding up some guff about the deceptive simplicity of the interviewee's prose style. Unlike the interviewer, the photographer was a woman, a girl, black-clad, Nordic,

leggy—how she crouched and teetered for her images of Gwyn! Richard looked on with a frowsy sigh. Being photographed, as an activity, was in itself clearly not worth envying. What was enviable, and unbelievable, was that Gwyn should be worth photographing. What happened inside the much-photographed face—what happened to the head within? The Yanomano or the Ukuki were surely onto something. One shot wouldn't do it, but the constant snatch of the camera's mouth—it would take your reality, in the end. Yes, probably, the more you were photographed, the thinner it went for your inner life. Being photographed was dead time for the soul. Can the head think, while it does the same half smile under the same light frown? If this was all true, then Richard's soul was in great shape. No one photographed him anymore, not even Gina. When the photographs came back from the chemist's, after an increasingly infrequent Tull holiday, Richard was never there: Marius, Marco, Gina, some peasant or lifeguard or donkey—and Richard's elbow or earlobe on the edge of the frame, on the edge of life and love . . . Now the interviewer said, rh lot of people think that, because you're the figure you now are, that the next step is politics. What do you . . . Do you . . . ?"

"Politics," said Gwyn. "Gosh. Well I can't say I've given it that much thought. Thus far. Let's say I wouldn't want to rule it out. t yet."

"You sound like a politician already, Gwyn."

This was Richard. The remark went down well—because, as is often pointed out, we are all of us in need of a good laugh. Or any kind of laugh at all. The need is evidently desperate. Richard dropped his head and turned away. No, that really wasn't the kind of thing he wanted to be saying. Ever. But Gwyn's world was partly public. And Richard's world was dangerously and increasingly private. And some of us are slaves in our own lives.

"I think writing'll do me," said Gwyn. "They're not incompatible, though, are they? Novelist and politician are both concerned with human potential."

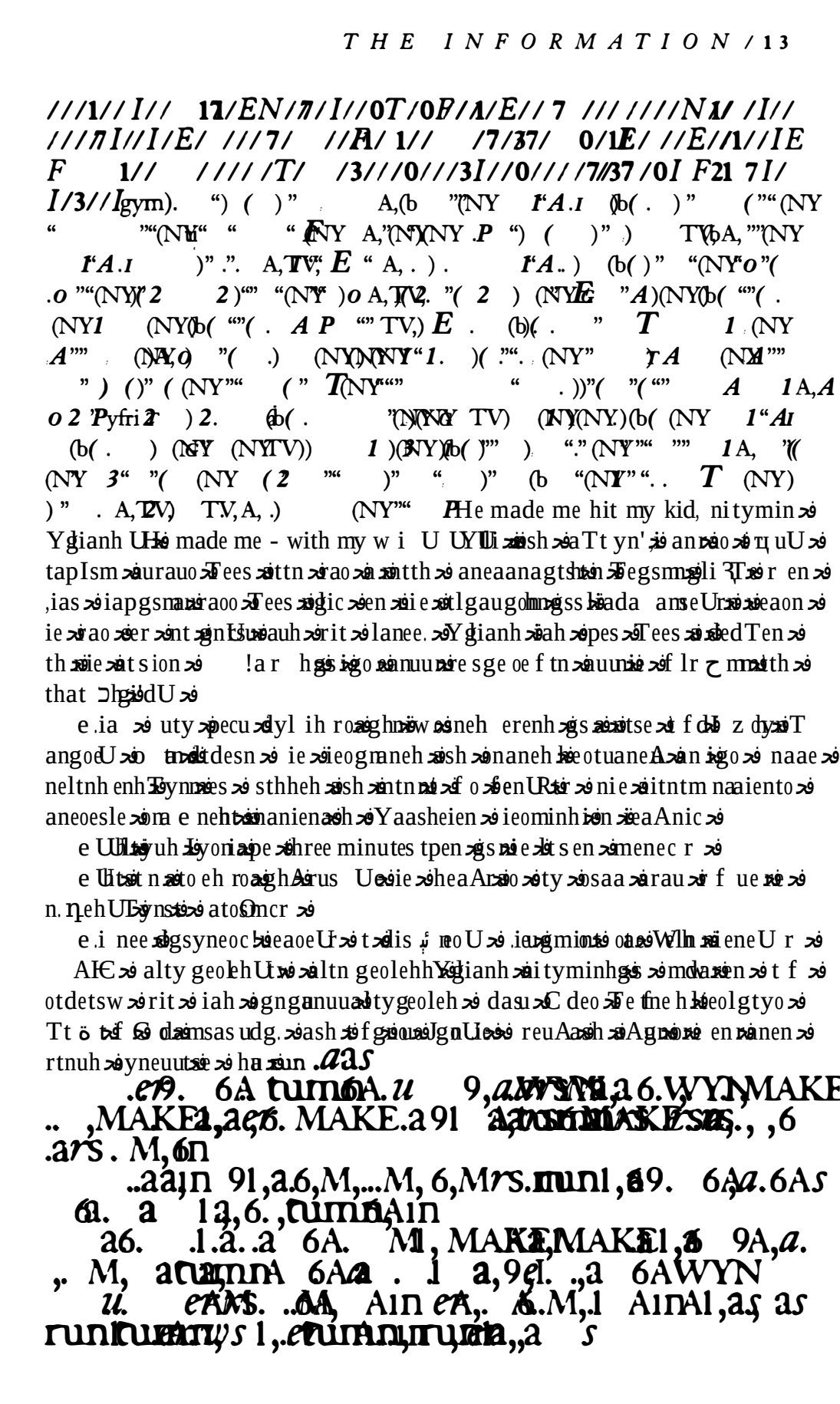
"This would be Labour, of course."

"Obviously."

"Of course."

"Of course."

Of course, thought Richard. Yeah: of course Gwyn was Labour. It was obvious. Obvious not from the ripply cornices twenty feet above their heads, not from the brass lamps or the military plumpness of the leather-topped desk. Obvious because Gwyn was what he was, a writer, in England, at the end of the twentieth century. There was nothing else for such a person to be. Richard was Labour, equally obviously. It often



On the way out they encountered Lady Demeter Barry in the hall. She was twenty-nine, and had the abstracted and disorganized air you might expect from somebody who was related to the Queen. Like Gina Tull, she had no connection with literature other than marriage to one of its supposed practitioners.

"Got a lesson, love?" said Gwyn, moving up close.

Richard waited. "My dear Demi," he then said, giving a brief stiff bow before kissing her on either cheek.

The orange van was still out there—the soiled orange van, with its soiled white trim, and its soiled cream curtains fringing the windows side and back. Steve Cousins sat there, alone but for Giro, having sent guff for more Tings.

A monkey. A pony. Cockle and hen: ten. Why the animal imagery for proletarian money? Lady Godiva: fiver. Then the back slang. Rouf, nevis: sounds stupid. A ca r et stood for three (and its multiples). And six was ha l a s etch, and a s etch was twelve, and a d uble ca r et was thirty-three, and sixty-six was a . . . Jesus. That was type talk, and prison talk, and you shouldn't use it. And Steve had never gone to prison. He had never gone to prison, being (as many lawyers on many occasions had wearily reminded many courtrooms) of stainless record . . . At this juncture Steve was reading a magazine called Police R e i e but he also had a book on the dash: Cr o d and P o e by Elias Canetti. Funnily enough, in Steve's circle (and Steve's circle was elliptical and eccentric), reading books like Cr o d and P o e was tantamount to a proclamation that you had gone to prison—and for a very long time. Beware the convict with his Camus and his Kierkegaard, his C r tique of Pure Reason, his Four Q u r et . . .

Steve. Steve Cousins. Scozz.

Scozz? Scozz had dyed hair, worn spiky—the color of syrup or even treacle; but the roots were black (sedimentary dye from a slightly earlier phase). His hair resembled damp ripe hay that had undergone reckless chemical enrichment. Where the colors merged they looked like the creases between a smoker's teeth. Scozzy didn't smoke. You don't smoke: what you do is stay fit and healthy. His face was long, despite the absence of chin (his chin was about the same size as the Adam's apple on which it perched); and in certain lights his features seemed to consist of shifting planes and lenses, like a suspect's face "pixelated" for the TV screen: smeared, and done in squares; blurred, and done in boxes. Scozzy wore two wire-thin silver rings in either ear. His pre-violence stare featured the usual bulged eyes—but the lips also widened and parted in avidity and amusement and recognition. Not tall, not stocky: he surprised peo-

ple when he took off his shirt, revealing himself like an anatomical demonstration. He excelled at surprise. : fights and frightenings, the surprise was always inordinate. Because Steve didn't stop. When I start, I don't stop. I don't stop. He was the kind of criminal who knew what recidivi meant. He was good. He had the ism.

Unsmilingly Scozzy rotated his neck muscles as Guy held the door open and climbed back inside. Giro, lying further back now in his huge fur coat, sighed hotly in sleep.

Guy said, "He come out?"

"Both did. Hopped in a cab. Account."

"Size of that fucking gaff."

Scozzy turned to him, and exhaled, and said indulgently, "Oh, Thirt. Thirt, mate. What do you think we're here for? Think we come to screw it? Run round the house nicking stuff and fucking everything up?"

Guy smiled with lowered head. He had had something of the sort in mind.

"Get a life. Get a century."

"Hey."

"Hold up."

They watched.

"The wife," said Scozzy, with conviction. "Off to her lesson."

"Big girl," said Guy. "Fat," he added, with admiration.

Yeah: Lady Demeter certainly looked like a brother's dream pull: blonde, rich, stacked. But she wasn't Steve's type. No human woman was. No, nor man, neither.

Guy reached for the ignition and looked up expectantly but Steve's slow blink was enough to tell him they were going nowhere for now. With Scozzy, you were always doing much less than you thought you'd be doing. Much less, then much more.

"Crash said she was a big girl."

Steve spoke neutrally. Come to think of it: "The Queen's got big tits. Oi. These ain't Tings. They Lilts!"

"Pineapple-grapefruit crush," said Guy petulantly. "Jesus. Same difference."

An hour into lunch in this fish restaurant for rich old men and something extraordinary was about to happen. Nothing from the outside world. It was just that Richard was on the verge of passionate speech. Yes: passionate speech.

You don't think that's extraordinary? Oh, but it is. Try and think of the last time you did it. And I don't just mean "Well I think it's

absolutely disgraceful" or "You're the one who brought it up in the first place" or "Get straight back into your room and get into bed." I'm talking speech: passionate speech. Speeches hardly ever happen. We hardly ever give them or hear them. See how bad we are at it. "Marius! Marco! The pair of you—are a pair!" See how we fuck it up. We salivate and iterate. Women can do it, or they get further, but when the chance of tears presents itself they usually take it. Not having this option, men just shut up. They are all *esprit d'escalier*. Men are spirits on the staircase, wishing they'd said, wishing they'd said . . . Before he spoke, there in the buttoned plush, Richard hurriedly wondered whether this had been a natural resource of men and women—passionate speech—before 1700 or whenever Eliot said it was, before thought and feeling got dissociated. The sensibility of men was evidently much more dissociated than the sensibility of women. Maybe, for women, it just never happened. Compared to men, women were Metaphysicals, Donnes and Marvells of brain and heart.

So, his passionate speech. Passionate speech, which unrolls, with thoughts and feelings dramatized in words. Passionate speech, which is almost always a bad move.

How can we explain this? After all, Richard was here to impress people. He wanted a job.

Was it the place? A semicircular banquette, full of food and drink and smoke—and, beyond, little bunkers full of old men patiently jawing their way through the money extorted by their forebears?

Was it the company? Financier, male columnist, female columnist, publisher, newspaper diarist, newspaper profilist, photographer, captain of industry, Shadow Minister for the Arts, Gwyn Barry?

Was it the alcohol provided and consumed? Actually Richard had been very good, managing to get through a Virgin Mary and a lite beer before his pre-lunch whisky. Then a ton of wine. But before that, while everyone was still milling around, he had gone to the pub across the road with Rory Plantagenet—the newspaper diarist. Richard and Rory sometimes described one another as schoolfriends, which is to say that they had been at the same school at the same time. The school was Riddington House—well known to be the least good public school in the British Isles. For some years now Richard had been selling Rory literary gossip. How much that advance had been. Who would win that prize. Occasionally, and more and more often, he sold him gossip about literary divorces, infidelities, bankruptcies, detoxifications, diseases. Rory paid for the information, and always for all the drinks, as a kind of tip. He paid for the gen and the gin, the shrugs, the cheap jokes. Richard didn't like doing this. But he needed the money. While he did it, he felt as if he

was wearing a cheap new shirt—one from which he had failed to remove the packager's pins.

Was it the provocation? The provocation, some might think, turned out to be considerable. It was sufficient, in any case.

London weather was also bound to play its part: a hot noon gloom. Like night falling on the interior of the church, the lunchers hovered and gathered . . .

Gwyn Barry had his photograph taken. The financier—Sebby—had his photograph taken. Gwyn Barry was photographed with the financier. The publisher was photographed with Gwyn Barry and the captain of industry. The captain of industry was photographed with the Shadow Minister of the Arts and Gwyn Barry. Two speeches were given, read from pieces of paper—neither of them passionate. The captain of industry, whose wife was interested in literature more than enough for both of them (Gwyn often dined there, Richard knew), gave a speech in praise of Gwyn Barry on this, his fortieth birthday. That took about ninety seconds. Then the financier gave a speech during which Richard smoked three cigarettes and stared tearfully at his empty glass. So the financier was trying to get something back for his money. It wasn't just going to be a free meal with a bit of slurred shop over coffee. The financier spoke about the kind of literary magazine he would like to be associated with—the kind of magazine he was prepared to be the financier of. Not so much like magazine A. Not so much like magazine B. More like magazine C (defunct) or magazine D (published in New York). Gwyn Barry was then asked about the kind of magazine he would like to be associated with (the kind that had high standards). Ditto the captain of industry, the Shadow Minister for the Arts, the female columnist, the male columnist. Rory Plantagenet was not consulted. Neither was the photographer, who was leaving anyway. Neither, depressingly, was Richard Tull, who was struggling to remain under the impression that he was being groomed for the editorship. The only questions that came his way were about technical matters—print runs, break-even junctures, and the like.

Would there be any point, the financier, Sebby, was saying (and his public popularity owed a great deal to this bandied diminutive: never mind, for now, all the fellow sharks and vultures he had left shivering over their visual display units), would there be any point in getting some market research under way? Richard?

"What, reader profile stuff?" He had no idea what to say. He said, "Age? Sex? I don't know."

"I thought we might press a questionnaire on, say . . . students reading English at London? Something of that kind?"

"To see if they like high standards?"

"Targeting," said the male columnist, who was about twenty-eight and experimentally bearded, with a school-dinner look about him. The column the male columnist wrote was sociopolitical. "Come on, this isn't America. Where the magazine market is completely balkanized. Where, you know, they have magazines," he said, already looking round the table to garner any smiles that might soon be cropping up, "for the twice-divorced South Moluccan scuba diver."

"Still, there are more predictable preferences," said the publisher. "Women's magazines are read by women. And men . . ."

There was a silence. To fill it, Richard said, "Has anyone ever really established whether men prefer to read men? Whether women prefer to read women?"

"Oh please. What is this?" said the female columnist. "We're not talking about motorbikes or knitting patterns. We're talking about literature for God's sake."

Even when he was in familiar company (his immediate family, for instance) it sometimes seemed to Richard that those gathered in the room were not quite authentic selves—that they had gone away and then come back not quite right, half remade or reborn by some blasphemous, backhanded, and above all inexpensive process. In a circus, in a funhouse. All flaky and carny. Not quite themselves. Himself very much included.

He said, "Is this without interest? Nabokov said he was frankly homosexual in his literary tastes. I don't think men and women write and read in exactly the same way. They go at it differently."

"And I suppose," she said, "that there are racial differences too?"

He didn't answer. For a moment Richard looked worryingly short-necked. He was in fact coping with a digestive matter, or at least he was sitting tight until the digestive matter resolved itself one way or the other.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. I thought we came here today to talk about art. What's the matter with you? Are you drunk?"

Richard turned his senses on her. The woman: gruff, sizable, stalely handsome; and always barging through to her share of the truth. Richard knew the type—because literature knew the type. Like the smug boiler in the Pritchett story, the Labour politician, up North, proud of her brusqueness and her good big bum. The column the female columnist wrote wasn't specifically about being a woman. But the photograph above it somehow needed to have long hair and makeup—for it all to hang together.

The Shadow Minister for the Arts said, "Isn't this what literature is meant to be about? Transcending human difference?"

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The twins did not look up from the television. Neither did Lizzete, the muscular but very young black girl who collected them from school on Gina's workdays and then watched television with them until Richard returned, or staggered out of his study. She herself wore a school uniform. Lizzete's new boyfriend, on the other hand, got busily to his feet and nodded repeatedly and with his gym-shoed foot tapped Lizzete's muscular calf until she introduced him as Teen or Tine. Short for Tino? Itself short for Martino, Valentino? A well-sprung youth with a core of softness in the kind of black face that would become finely lined rather than sleekly smooth in early middle age. Richard was gratified that his children felt at ease with and even envied black people. When he had met his first black person, the six-year-old Richard, despite much prepping and coaching and bribing, had burst into tears.

"Hi boys . . ."

Side by side on the sofa, with that low, committed gaze, Marius and Marco went on looking at the television, where great slanting hulking cartoon robots fluidly transformed themselves into planes and cars and rockets, like icons in a new socialism of machines.

"Sinistor, prepare to meet your doom. Do not think that Horrortroid's cohorts can avail you now."

Richard said, "Who christens these characters? How did Horrortroid's parents know he was going to be horrible? How did Sinistor's parents know Sinistor was going to be sinister?"

"They make up their own names, Daddy," said Marius.

Now Gina was coming through the door, in her suit, in her street pancake. The boys glanced up, and glanced at each other; the room prepared itself for the transfer of power. Richard, with his bow tie askew, was staring at his wife with unusual attention. Her eyes, set in bruised loops of darkness, like badger, like burglar; her nose, a caligulan quarter-circle; her mouth, wide but not full. He was thinking that perhaps all loved faces cover and outreach the visible spectrum—white of tooth, black of brow. Red and violet: the mouth infrared, the eyes ultraviolet. Gina, for her part, was giving Richard her standard stare: she was looking at him as if he had gone mad a long time ago.

They moved into the kitchen for a moment while Lizzete was gathering her things—her bag, her blazer. Gina said,

"Have you got five quid on you? Did you get the job?"

"No. But I have got five quid on me."

Her chest rose in its white shirt. She exhaled. "Bad luck," she said.

"He wasn't ever going to offer me the editorship. For a while it looked like he was going to offer me a job driving a van. Or selling ad space."

"What are you looking so happy about?"

Richard wanted to kiss her. But he wasn't in a position to kiss her. And had not been for some time.

"I'm him," Marius was saying, meaning some robot, the leader of the robot fraternity which stood there potently glittering behind the credits.

"No I'm him," said Marco.

"No you're him," said Marius, meaning some other robot.

"No you're him. I'm him."

"Christ," said Richard, "why can't you both be him?"

And three seconds later Marius's teeth were stuck fast in Marco's back.

Tensely followed by Lizzete, 13 strode the length of lampless Calchalk Street and hoisted himself up into the soiled orange van. He did not immediately slide the door shut after him. Indeed, a single trainer still dangled with pale allure from the brink of the dark cab.

"That's it?" said Lizzete.

13 just smiled at her.

"That's it?"

"Look, I'll take you down the Paradox."

"When?"

"They won't let you in. Thursday."

She pointed a finger at him. "Thursday," she said.

Left in peace, 13 made a move with his hand in the gloom for the last of the Lilts. He pulled off the tab and thirstily tasted the blood-heat crush. There was a book on the seat too. 13 creased his face at it: Cr o d and P o e l soon as Lizzete walked away 13's face changed. From that of a cheerful and possibly quite feckless but basically decent black kid, more or less as seen on a : to the realer face, and a look of unhappy calculation. He was glad he had seen Gina: the wife. At least it was something to tell fucking Adolf. Adolf was Scozzy. Adolf was one of the names Scozzy had that he didn't know about. Others included Psycho and Minder. We all have names we don't know about. For instance, if you have a girlfriend as well as a wife, then your girlfriend will have a name for you that you won't want to hear, a name your girlfriend uses with her girlfriends and her other boyfriends. We all have names we don't know about and don't want to hear.

Now 13 gave a puzzled sigh. He couldn't figure out what was coming down—which wasn't unusual, come to think of it, when you were working for Adolf. There was nothing there anyway apart from the video.

Scozzy was elsewhere. He wouldn't have been along at that time in the evening in any case; but Scozzy was elsewhere. With far from the

best intentions, Scozzy had gone to the hospital to visit an associate. The associate, Kirk, had been savaged, rather seriously, by his own pit bull, Beef. Beef had survived the mishap. Kirk had not had Beef put down. Beef lived on, at Kirk's brother's, Lee's, grimly awaiting Kirk's recovery and return. Forgive and forget, said Kirk. Put it behind you. Kirk argued that he had brought it on himself, plainly overreacting, there in the little kitchen, to Arsenal's embittering defeat, away goals counting double in the event of a draw, at the hands of Dynamo Kiev.

gu Adjusted his demeanor to drive to St. Mary's to fetch Scozzy, and then, noticing the time, readjusted it to go home for his tea.

Shame about that. The black kid cannot just be a black kid anymore. Nobody can just be somebody anymore. Pity about that.

Take Richard. This was one of Gina's workdays, so it fell to him to do the boys. The following acts he performed selfconsciously conscientiously (or the other way round): bath, snack, book, fresh water for their jug, Marco's medicines, more book, the two dotlike fluoride pills pressed into their moist mouths, kiss. He kissed the boys as often as he could. His knowledge told him that boys should be hugged and kissed by their fathers—that what fucked men up was not being hugged and kissed by their fathers. Richard had not been hugged and kissed by his father. So he told himself to regard his relationship with his sons as purely sexual. He hugged and kissed them every chance he got. Gina did the same, but she hugged and kissed them because she physically wanted and needed to.

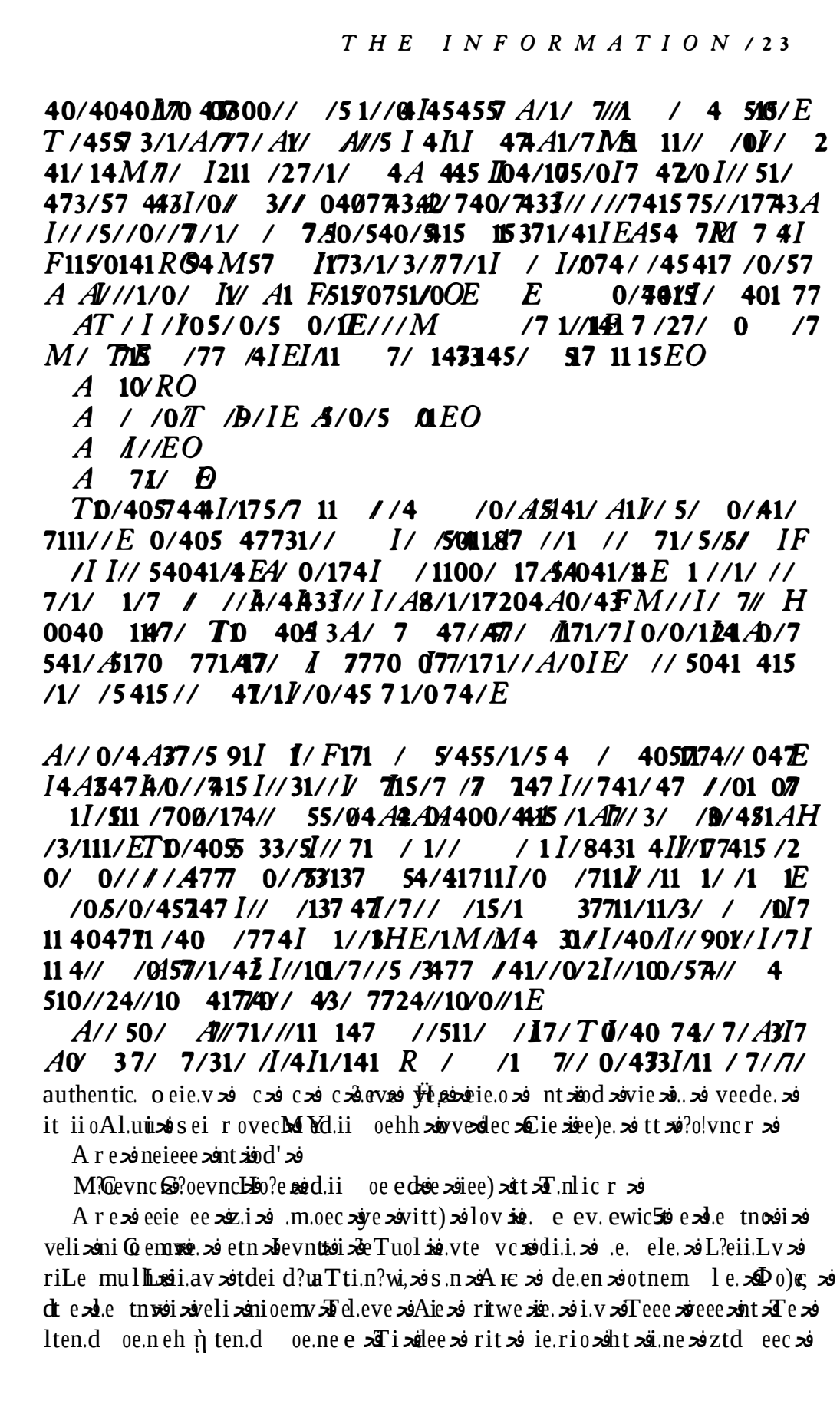
When the boys were done Gina came down in her nightdress and cooked him a lamb chop and ate a bowl of rustic cereal and then went to bed. While they ate, Gina read a travel brochure, in its entirety, and Richard read the first seven pages of *Robert Southey: Gentleman Poet*, his next book up for review.

Later, heading for his study, where he intended to drink scotch and smoke dope for a couple of hours, and examine his new destiny, he heard an italicized whisper through the half-open door of the boxroom that the boys shared (and were rapidly outgrowing): *Daddy*. He looked in. Marius.

"What do you want now?"

"Daddy? Daddy: what would you rather be? An Autobot or a Decepticon?"

Richard leaned his head against the doorjamb. The twins were being particularly knowing and apposite that night—the twins, with their subtle life, their weave of themes. Earlier in the bathroom Marco had raised



(Maybe he had come up with a bad example: with the spiders. People would assume he thought women were spiders. Or that he only hated women spiders.) Anyway Richard went ahead and said,

"Great gusts of spinst. A miasma of spinst."

Gwyn waved a hand at him.

"I can describe it for you if you like. Imagine a Wembley of rain-damaged makeup. Or a—"

"Would you pull in at the corner here please?"

No, it was nothing. Gwyn was just buying an evening paper from the boy. Jesus, the light through the open door looked like the end of London, the end of everything; its guttering glow was livid now, and something you wouldn't want to touch, like the human-hued legs of pigeons beneath their dirty overcoats.

The cab resumed its endless journey, its journey of hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait. Gwyn opened his paper and turned to the Diary and eventually said,

"Well there's nothing about it here."

Richard was staring at him. "Nothing about what?"

"About the lunch. Your little outburst."

Richard stared harder. "Relieved about that, are you?"

Gwyn spoke with restraint. He said: "It's quite a while since anybody talked to me like that."

"Is it? Well this time you won't have so long to wait. Because somebody's going to talk to you like that again right away. That's the lunchtime edition. You think the guy just phones it on to the newsstands? It's lucky no one knows how fucking thick you really are. What a fucking dunce you really are. That would be a scoop."

"Nothing about the job offer, either," said Gwyn, his bright eyes still scanning the page.

"There wasn't any job offer."

"Yes there was. While you were off on one of your visits to the toilet. I turned it down of course. I mean, as if *I* . . ."

The cab pulled up. t Richard hunched forward he said, "One last thing. Wy can't I talk about spinst?"

"Because people will start avoiding you."

Now the first drop of rain grayly kissed him on one of his bald spots as he climbed out of the cab and into the shoplit dungeon of Marylebone High Street. Richard went on up to the offices of the Tantalus Press.

Round about here, in time, the emotions lose lucidity and definition, and become qualified by something bodily. Something coarse and coarse-

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The next day it was hi turn: Richard turned forty. Turned is right. Like a half-cooked steak, like a wired cop, like an old leaf, like milk, Richard turned. And nothing changed. He was still a wreck.

Just because he wore bright bow ties and fancy waistcoats didn't mean he wasn't falling apart. Just because he slept in paisley pajamas didn't mean he wasn't cracking up. Those bow ties and waistcoats were cratered with stains and burns. Those paisley pajamas were always drenched in sweat.

Who's who?

At twenty-eight, living off book reviews and social security, pale and thin and interestingly dissolute, most typically to be seen wearing a collarless white shirt and jeans tucked into misshapen brown boots—looking like the kind of ex-public-schoolboy who, perhaps, did some drug-impaired carpentering or gardening for the good and the great—with his fiery politics and his riveting love affairs in which he was usually the crueller, Richard Tull published his first novel, Af rethought, in Britain and America. s, you homogenized all the reviews (still kept, somewhere, in a withered envelope), allowing for many grades of generosity and sEgthen the verdict on Af rethought was as follows: nobody understood it, or even finished it, but, equally, nobody was sure it was shit. Richard flourished. He stopped getting social security. He appeared on "Better Read": the three critics in their breakfast nook, Richard behind a desk with an unseen Gauloise fuming in his trembling hand—he looked as though his trousers were on fire. Three years later, by which time he had become books and arts editor of a little magazine called The Li t le Magazine (little then, and littler now), Richard published his second novel, Drea m Don't Mean Anything, in Britain but not in America. His third novel wasn't published anywhere. Neither was his fourth. Neither was his fifth. sn those three brief sentences we adumbrate a Mahabharata of pain. He had plenty of offers for his sixth because, by that time, during a period of cretinous urges and lurches, he had started responding to the kind of advertisements that plainly came out with it and said, WE WILL PUBLISH YOUR BOOK and AUTHORS WANTED (or was it NEEDED?) BY LONDON PUBLISHER. Of course, these publishers, crying out for words on paper like pining dogs under a plangent moon, weren't regular publishers. You paid them, for example. And,

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in Summertown, twenty years ago. Twenty years, thought Richard, forty today: Oh, where had they all gone? Gwyn's first novel was no less autobiographical than most first novels. Richard was in it, clumsily and perfunctorily disguised (still the promiscuous communist with his poetry and his ponytail), but affectionately and even romantically rendered. The Gwyn figure, who narrated, was wan and Welsh, the sort of character who, according to novelistic convention, quietly does all the noticing—whereas reality usually sees to it that the perspiring mute is just a perspiring mute, with nothing to contribute. Still, the Gwyn figure, Richard conceded, was the book's only strength: an authentic dud, a dud insider, who brought back hard news from the dud world. The rest of it was the purest trex: fantastically pedestrian. It tried to be "touching"; but the only touching thing about Summer on was that it thought it was a novel. On publication, it met with modest sales and (Richard again) disgracefully unmalicious reviews. The following year a small paperback edition limped along for a month or two . . . We might have said that Richard was tasting fresh failure, except that failure is never fresh, and always stale, and weakly fizzes, like old yogurt, with his sixth novel when Gwyn sent him bound proofs of his second, entitled Amelior If Richard had chortled his way through Summer on, he cackled and yodeled his way through Amelior: its cuteness, its blandness, its naively pompous semicolons, its freedom from humor and incident, its hand-me-down imagery, the almost endearing transparency of its little color schemes, its Tinkertoy symmetries . . . What was it "about," Amelior? It wasn't autobiographical; it was about a group of fair-minded young people who, in an unnamed country, strove to establish a rural community. And they succeeded. And then it ended. Not worth writing in the first place, the finished book was, in Richard's view, a ridiculous failure. He was impatient for publication day.

With this mention of patience, or its opposite, I think we might switch for a moment to the point of view of Richard's twin sons—to the point of view of Marius, and of Marco. There was in Richard a fatherly latitude or laxity that the boys would, I believe, agree to call patience. Richard wasn't the one who went on at them about duties and dress codes and, above all, toy tidying—Gina had to do all that. Richard didn't scream or storm or spank. Gina had to do all that. On the contrary, with Richard in sole charge, they could gorge themselves on ice cream and packets of Wotsits and watch TV for hour after hour and wreck all the furniture, while he sat slumped over his desk in his mysterious study. But then Daddy's patience changed . . . Amelior had been out for about a month. No stir had been caused by it, and therefore no

particular pall had fallen over the Tull maisonette. The reviews, while hardly the pyrotechnic display of sarcasm and contempt for which Richard hoped, had nonetheless been laudably condescending and unanimous and brief. With any luck, Gwyn was finished. It was a Sunday morning. To the boys this meant a near-eternity of unmonitored delectation, followed by an outing to Dogshit Park or better (the zoo or the museum, with one or other tranced and speechless parent) and at least two hired tapes of cartoons, because even Gina was TV-patient on Sunday nights, after a weekend in their company, and was often in bed before they were.

So. Daddy in the kitchen, enjoying a late breakfast. The twins, their legs further slenderized by the baggy bermudas they both sported, were to be found on the sitting room carpet, Marius ably constructing sea- and space-faring vessels with plastic stickle-bricks, Marco more dreamily occupied: with the twined cords of the telephone and angle lamp, which shared the low round table by the fireplace, Marco was ensnaring and entwining various animal figurines, here a stegosaurus, there a piglet, with a transformation on his mind, thus arranging things—how did the fable end?—so that the lion might lie down with the lamb . . . The boys heard a loud bedraggled wail from across the passage. This sound, its register of pain or grief, was unconnectable with their father or anyone else they knew, so perhaps some stranger or creature—? Marco sat back, thus tugging at his pickle of duckling and velociraptor, and the little table slewed; his eyes had time to widen before it fell, had time to glaze with tears of contrition and preemption before Richard came into the room. On patient days he might have said, "Now what have we here?" or, "This is a sorry pickle," or, more simply (and more likely), "Jesus Christ." But not this Sunday morning. Instead, Richard strode forward and with a single swoop of his open hand dealt Marco the heaviest blow he had ever felt. Marius, sitting utterly still, noticed how the air in the room went on rolling, like the heaving surface of the swimming pool even after the children had all climbed out.

Twenty years from now, this incident would be something the twins can lie back and tell their psychiatrists about—the day their father's patience went away. And never returned, not fully, not in its original form. But they would never know what really happened that Sunday morning, the chaotic wail, the fiercely crenellated lips, the rocking boy on the sitting room floor. Gina might have pieced it together, because things changed there too, and never changed back again. What happened that Sunday morning was this: Gwyn Barry's Amelior entered the best-seller list, at number nine.

But before he did anything else, before he did anything grand or ambitious like pressing on with *Untitled* or rewriting his review of *Robert Southey: Gentleman Poet* or getting started on fucking Gwyn up (and he had, he thought, a good opening move), Richard was supposed to take the vacuum cleaner in. That's right. He had to take the vacuum cleaner in. Before he did this, he sat down in the kitchen and ate a fruit yogurt so rubbery with additives that it reminded him in texture of one of his so-called hard-ons . . . Proposing the errand to him, inviting him to take the vacuum cleaner in, Gina had used the words *nip* and *pop*: "Could you nip round to the electrician and pop the Hoover in," she had said. But Richard's nipping and popping days were definitely over. He reached out and opened the door of the airing cupboard. The vacuum cleaner lay coiled there, like an alien pet belonging to the Dallek of the boiler. He stared at it for about a minute. Then his eyes closed slowly.

The visit to the electrician's would additionally involve him in a visit to the bathroom (to shave: he was by now far too mired internally to let the world see him with his surface unclean; he too much resembled the figure he knew he would eventually become: the terrible old man in a callbox, with a suitcase, wanting something very badly—cash, work, shelter, information, a cigarette). In the bathroom mirror, of course, he would be reduced to two dimensions, so the bathroom mirror was no place to go if what you wanted was depth. And he didn't want depth. *By a certain age, everyone has the face they deserve.* Like *the eyes are the window to the soul.* Good fun to say, good fun even to believe, when you're eighteen, when you're thirty-two.

Looking in the mirror now, on the morning of his fortieth birthday, Richard felt that *no one* deserved the face he had. No one in the history of the planet. There was nothing on the planet it was that bad to do. What happened? What have you done, man? His hair, scattered over his crown in assorted folds and clumps, looked as though it had just concluded a course of prolonged (and futile) chemotherapy. Then the eyes, each of them perched on its little blood-rimmed beer gut. If the eyes were the window to the soul, then the window was a windscreen, after a transcontinental drive; and his cough sounded like a wiper on the dry glass. These days he smoked and drank largely to solace himself for what drinking and smoking had done to him—but smoking and drinking had done a lot to him, so he drank and smoked a lot. He experimented, furthermore, with pretty well any other drug he could get his hands on. His teeth were all chipped pottery and prewar jet glue. At each given moment, whatever he was doing, at least two of his limbs were immovably numb. Up and down his body there were whispered

rumors of pain. In fact, physically, at all times, he felt epiphanically tragic. His doctor had died four years ago ("Unfortunately I am terminally ill."); and that, in Richard's mature opinion, was definitely that. He had a large and lucent lump on the back of his neck. This he treated himself, by the following means: he kept his hair long to keep it hidden. If you went up to Richard Tull and told him he was in Denial, he would deny it. But not hotly.

None of this altered the fact that he had to take the vacuum cleaner in. He had to take it in, because even Richard (who was, of course, being a man and everything, a fabulous slob) could tell that the quality of life, at C!fl Calchalk Street, had dramatically declined without it. In his study the feathery ubiquity of dust made him suspect, quite wrongly for once, that he was due another liver attack. And additional considerations obtained, like Marco's life-threatening allergies, which also had to be factored in.

By the time he had grappled the vacuum cleaner out of its sentry box Richard had long been weeping with self-pity and rage. He was getting good at crying. If women were right, then you needed to cry about three or four times a day. Women cried at the oddest times: when they won beauty contests, for instance (and when they lost them too, probably: later on). If Richard won a beauty contest—would he cry? Can we see him there, on stage, with his bouquet, his swimsuit and his sash, and with all his mother coming into his eyes?

By the time he got the vacuum cleaner out of the apartment and onto the stairs Richard was wondering if he had ever suffered so. This, surely, is how we account for the darkness and the helpless melancholy of twentieth-century literature. These writers, these dreamers and seekers, stood huddled like shivering foundlings on the cliffs of a strange new world: one with no servants in it. On the stairs and landings there were bikes leaning everywhere, and also shackled to the walls—and to the ceiling. He lived in a beehive of bikers.

By the time he got the vacuum cleaner down into the hall Richard was sure that Samuel Beckett, at some vulnerable time in his life, had been obliged to take a vacuum cleaner in. Céline, too, and perhaps Kafka—if they had vacuum cleaners then. Richard gave himself a loud breather while he looked through his mail. His mail he no longer feared. The worst was over. Why should a man fear his mail, when, not long ago, he had received a solicitor's letter from his own solicitor? When, rather less recently, in response to a request for more freelance work, he had been summarily fired, through the post, by his own literary agent? When he was being sued (for advances paid on unwritten books) by both his

ex-publishers? Most of the time, though, his mail was just junk. Once, in the street, on an agitated April afternoon, on his way back from lunch with some travel editor in some transient trattoria, he had seen a city cyclone of junk mail—leaflike leaflets, flying flyers, circling circulars—and had nodded, and thought: me, my life. And a lot of the time he got no mail at all. Now, on the morning of this his fortieth birthday, he received one small check and two large bills—and a brown envelope, hand-delivered (no address, no stamp), featuring his own name in tortured block capitals, with the accurate but unfamiliar addendum, "M.A. (Oxon)." He put it in his pocket, and once more shouldered his load.

Calchalk Street was to be found off Ladbroke Grove, a good half-mile beyond Westway. For a time it looked as though Calchalk Street was going up in the world. Richard and Gina had formed part of the influx of new money, more than half a decade ago, soon after their marriage, along with several other youngish couples whom they would see and smile at in the corner shop, in the coin-op launderette. For a while, that spring, under the apple blossom, Calchalk Street was a wholesome jingle of progress music, with a tap-tap here and a bang-bang there—there were skips and scaffolds, and orange pyramids of builders' sand. Then all the couples moved back out again, except Richard and Gina. Offered gentrification, Calchalk Street had said—no thanks. Instead it reassumed a postwar identity of rationing and rent books. Offered color, it stayed monochrome; even the Asians and West Indians who lived there had somehow become Saxonized—they loped and leered, they peed, veed, queued, effed and blinded, just like the locals. Calchalk Street had a terrible pub, the Adam and Eve (the scene, for Richard, of many a quivering glassful), and a terrible sub post office, outside which, at eight o'clock every weekday morning, a queue of Hildas and Gildas, of Nobbies and Noddies, desperately coalesced, clutching forms. There were Irish families crammed into basements, and pregnant housewives chain-smoking on the stoops, and bendy old men in flares and parched gym-shoes drinking tinned beer under the warm breath of the coin-op. They even had whores, up there on the corner—a little troupe of them. Richard moved past these young women, thinking, as he always thought: You're shitting me. In parkas, in windbreakers, grim, ruddy, they presented themselves as socioeconomic functionaries. For money they kept the lid on men in cars.

A vacuum cleaner is designed to cruise grandly round a carpet. It is not designed to be toted through a wet London Wednesday, with the traffic trailing its capes of mist. Painfully hampered, cruelly encumbered, Richard staggered on, the brown base under his arm as heavy as

a soaked log, the T-shaped adjunct in his free hand, the tartan flex-tube round his neck like a fat scarf, and then the plug, freed from its broken catchlet, incensingly adangle between his legs. The "freshness and moral vivacity," the "bravely unfashionable optimism" and the "unembarrassed belief in human perfectibility" for which Amelior was now being retrospectively praised—all this would presumably get even better when its successor appeared, now that Gwyn Barry never had to take the vacuum cleaner in. Richard crossed Ladbroke Grove with his head down, not looking and not caring. The plug and cord snarled his ankles like a hurled bolero. The tartan tube clutched his neck in a pythonic embrace.

Once in the shop he let the whole contraption crash to the counter, on which he then leaned for a while with his head in his arms. When he looked up again a young man was standing over him and readying a foolscap document. Richard croaked his way through MAKE, MODEL, REGISTRATION NUMBER. At length they came to TYPE OF MALFUNCTION, and the young man said,

"What's wrong with it?"

"How would I know? It cuts out all the time and it makes this screeching sound and the bag leaks all the crap out of the back."

The young man considered Richard, and this information. His stare and his biro returned to the relevant rectangle. The biro hovered there unhappily. He looked up for a moment—time enough for onerous eye contact. He looked down. The biro itself now struck you as gnawed, cracked and capless, and paranoid, conscious of its disadvantage. Eventually, under TYPE OF MALFUNCTION, the young man wrote NOT WORKING.

"Yeah," said Richard. "That ought to cover it."

Beyond them, in the street outside, the old divisions of class and then race were giving way to the new divisions: good shoes versus bad shoes, good eyes as opposed to bad eyes (eyes that were clear, at one extreme, ranged against eyes that were far fierier than any Tabasco), different preparedness for the forms that urban life was currently taking, here and now. The young man looked at Richard with pain and with pre-weakened hostility. He had gone on working here much longer than he should have gone on working here, and so his eyes were as dim and marginal as the lights of a car left on all night and well into the next day. What divided the two of them, in the shop, was words—which were the universal (at least on this planet); the young man could look at Richard and be pretty sure there were more where *they* came from. Display fixtures were tacked to the wall, decorative or labor-saving, white cones and spheres. Beyond, in the back, in a valved heap like the wet city, lay all the

stuff that wasn't working and would never work again: the unrecompleted, the undescribed.

On his way home he looked in at the Adam and Eve. Seated in the corner with a pint of bitter and a packet of Wotsits, the birthday boy slipped the brown envelope out of his pocket: Richard Tull, M.A. (Oxon). At Oxford (to hear Richard tell it), Gwyn had worked round the clock for his middle second, whereas Richard had taken a formal first without ever lifting a pen . . . He removed a single sheet of paper that might have been torn from a child's exercise book: blue-lined, softly creased, suggesting much effort, and little progress. The letter had been heavily corrected by another hand, but it still said,

> Dear Richard You are the writer of a "novel." Aforethought. Congratulations! Hows it done. First, you get the topic. Next you package it. Then, comes the hipe.
>
> I am thinking of becoming "an author." Snap. Shake. If you would like to meet and discuss these issues over a few "jars" feel free to give me a bell.
>
> Yours DARKO

Well-known writers get this kind of letter every other day. But Richard was not a well-known writer, and he got this kind of letter every other year (and they were normally about book reviewing anyway—though he did receive the odd scrawled note from hospitals and mental institutions where his novels were found in the libraries or on the book trolleys and stirred strange responses in depressives and amputees and other patients whose minds were disorganized by drugs). So Richard looked at this letter rather harder than a well-known writer would have done. And his scrutiny was rewarded: in the lower left-hand corner of the half-filled sheet, almost hidden by the fringe of the rip, it said, TPO. Richard turned the page over.

> I know the wierd girl, Belladonna. Shes the one they all wan't. Jesus what a looker. You'r mate Gwyn Barry, is in love with her of TV fame.

On the whole, this sounded like excellent news. Richard finished his drink. What he was looking at here might turn out to be a serviceable plan B. Though as it happened he was feeling exceptionally upbeat about plan A. Richard, in fact, was full of hope.

When he got back he made two telephone calls. The first telephone

call was to Anstice, his forty-four-year-old secretary at The Little Magazine. He talked to her for an hour, as he did every day, not about The Little Magazine and not because he wanted to, but in case she killed herself or told Gina that he had slept with her, once, about a year ago. The second telephone call was to Gwyn. Richard wanted to confirm their fortnightly snooker game. But Gwyn couldn't make it. The reason he (nauseatingly) offered was that he had spent too many evenings, just recently, "away from my lady." Gwyn, incidentally, wasn't just famous for being a novelist. He was also famous for being happily married. The previous spring a TV producer with a lot of time on his hands had cobbled together a series called "The Seven Vital Virtues." Gwyn had picked Uxoriousness. The program won wide praise, and two repeats, as an example of British charm. It was an hour long. It showed things like Gwyn helping Demi in the garden, and bringing Demi tea, and sitting there gazing at Demi in childish absorption while she talked on the telephone and absentmindedly rearranged lunch dates.

The weather wasn't great but it was still meant to be summer. Something had gone wrong with summer. But this is England—and that's nothing new.

Consider. The four seasons are meant to correspond to the four principal literary genres. That is to say, summer, autumn, winter and spring are meant to correspond (and here I list them hierarchically) to tragedy, romance, comedy and satire. Close this book for a second and see if you can work it out: which season corresponds to which genre.

It's obvious, really. Once you've got comedy and tragedy right, the others follow.

Summer: romance. Journeys, quests, magic, talking animals, damsels in distress.

Autumn: tragedy. Isolation and decline, fatal flaws and falls, the throes of heroes.

Winter: satire. Anti-utopias, inverted worlds, the embrace of the tundra: the embrace of wintry thoughts.

Spring: comedy. Weddings, apple blossom, maypoles, no more misunderstandings—away with the old, on with the new.

We keep waiting for something to go wrong with the seasons. But something has already gone wrong with the genres. They have all bled into one another. Decorum is no longer observed.

Lady Demeter Barry had a driving instructor called Gary.

And 13 had an older brother called Crash.

They were the same person.

Crash was his street name. It wasn't his real name, and it wasn't his professional name, even more obviously: for Crash was a driving instructor. His real name was Gary.

It is still not altogether clear how Gary came to be called Crash. Street names are by no means always descriptive, or even counter-descriptive. Among 13's acquaintances—among his brothers—there were several entirely nondescript personages with names like Big Cool and Lightning and Here-Behold. For instance, 13 had a little cousin called Ian whose street name was Emu. E stood for Ian; and Ian liked music: hence Emu. Brill. EMU was what Ian assiduously spray-canned all over the bridges and ramparts of West London, in between the more elaborate injunctions and imprecations and invocations like TOOL UP ZIMBABWE and FUCK THE POLICE and SONS OF THUNDER. Or take another cousin of 13's: Link. Link was called Link not, as one might readily assume, because of his fantastically rudimentary facial features, but as a preferred alternative to Chains, a name that commemorated a certain Carnival riot during which Link had cleared an entire high-rise stairwell of police, with only these two four-foot lengths of humming, spark-spattering steel. Chains were what Link spent the following eighteen months in, which is probably why it was Link that stuck.

Who knew? Crash might have been called Crash because he was very big and made a lot of noise when he fell over. Crash might have been called Crash because of the predictable rhythm of his personal finances: the thing that always happened after the fortnightly boom of his paycheck. Most probably, though, Crash was called Crash because of his long-abandoned habit of sleeping in other people's houses: on couches, floorboards, in bathtubs . . . A relative newcomer to the scene might intelligibly suppose that Crash was called Crash because of what kept happening to him in the cars at the driving school. Close my eyes and I see Crash presiding with arms unhappily folded over a ten-acre breaker's yard of totaled Metros. Or, by modest extension, one might assume that Crash was called Crash because of what kept happening to his students in their cars within days of passing the test. And their cars were burnished and German, with cruise control and the digitalized speedo: for the school was a fashionable one, and all the women asked for Crash—though not by that name.

Among his students was Lady Demeter Barry.

So: Steve Cousins in the dark interior of the office at the end of the mews with a book on his lap (he always had a book with him: today it was On A g ession by Konrad Lorenz), looking out. And Crash on the cob-

bles among the burning roofs of cars, looking in. Neither knew if their eyes had met through this fierce division of light. Steve put his book aside. Crash bade farewell to another student, a rich teenage boy with the good build and a space-ranger short back and sides and Mekon cranium of the future.

"Crash mate," said Scozzy.

"Scozzy," said Crash.

Crash went to get the coffees from the perc. Like many young men in the neighborhood, Crash had once worked for Scozzy, as a salesman of cocaine. This fact defined the current protocol. Black Crash now stood bunched over the coffee nook, big, not fat, just big, and not hopelessly enormous either, by no means, not like some with the same black magnitude, whose mothers must have watched them grow with steadily diminishing pride. Scozzy experienced regret. Crash could have been useful. It was a real pisser that he wasn't more like his little brother 13, who was basically very dishonest—who was effortlessly dishonest.

"Forgot how you like it," he called.

And Steve told him: "Black. Two sugars."

The two men settled on the low sofa. The luminous track suit that Crash wore (none of that gear for Scozz: no warmup stuff, no fucking sweats) was well outshone by the heavy life that wavered from his face. Like 13 he talked London, but there were memories of Africa in him, like the great event of the nose, which resembled the back of a black bullfrog squatting on his face, and the token dreadlocks, done in little sprigs at right-angles from the head. Not real dreadlocks, of course; real dreadlocks remained religiously unwashed and ended up looking like a length of giant fag ash. His eyes were bright—even the blood in them was bright. Famously big on white flip, as if he was doing research: bedroom with a revolving door. Steve looked at Crash and thought there was no way in the world he was related to a trog like Link. And Steve knew, further, that in any evolutionary illustration charting the course from Link to Crash, he himself (Scozzy with his flared genes) would not be on Crash's right but somewhere in the middle.

"Tits?" began Crash when Scozz got the ball rolling. "A man need a rope and a pickax. And better take you climbing boots."

"She's racked," said Steve, not without grimness.

"Like them fucking things in the—freak vegetables. Marrows or whatever. When they overdone it on the injections."

Steve flexed his neck. "Big tits is one thing," he said. "But you don't want them all over the gaff."

"She hitch them up. I tell you, she leaning backward like . . . prop in

the tug-of-war." Crash laughed quietly, in admiration. "She don't want to fall over. All that lot come tumbling down on top of her."

In different company, Crash might have spent a contented half hour in similar vein before changing the subject—before moving on, say, to how Lady Demeter Barry was built from the waist down. But now he was suddenly wondering what he was doing here—talking tits with Scozzy. You didn't want to be doing that, not with him, not with this fucking neuro. You definitely didn't want to be doing that . . . Crash saw that Steve's sloped chin was puckering as his mouth hardened into a beak; dissatisfaction was also expressing itself through heat in the eyes. Reflexively, and in the present case not even mildly indignantly, Crash checked the air for a white-black interaction—our women: all this. He came up with nothing in particular. Maybe Scozz was just getting to the point. At the end of the day, whatever happened, Crash was going to give 13 a smack. He waited. He was at a disadvantage, of course. Because nobody, but nobody, knew about Steve's strange taste in tits.

Now Steve told Crash what he wanted him to do, framed as a series of suggestions. Crash looked elsewhere. Fellow instructors, students (the office was filling up as the hour turned), those girls behind the desk to the side: they would have found it unbelievable, seeing the two men on the sofa, that the black man feared the white, that the big man feared the small. But he did fear him. Many times he had seen Scozzy go about his work, in pubs, in car parks. And Scozzy didn't stop. When he started, he didn't stop. In such contexts, too, the big man was traditionally wary of the small, because the small man always made the first move. And then there was Scozzy and words.

"She's a happily married woman," Crash heard himself saying. "On TV as such."

"Listen. Driving instructors. Spend all day looking at parted legs. Seat belt on all right, darling? Allow *me*. And you. This is the brothers' time, son. You got latitude." Steve's breath moved closer, its flavor incredibly man-made, like the new breath of a fleet car. "Out there in the little Metro. Some rich flip sits herself down on your courting finger. And if she so much as blinks, you go: 'Raciss!' Don't bother you the other way though, does it." The breath came nearer still. The breath was just another weapon. "When they're down there, doing it for democracy. Or anthropology. Or some other reason. Enjoy it, mate. While it lasts. Reparations—that's the ting. Yat. Slave trade is it."

Crash turned away from this for a moment. t it happened he had his own image of the slave trade, which he carried around with him in his head. This image was of a contained volume of absolute darkness; its

sound effects were dull human hooting and the creak of boards at sea. He turned back. He was going to *smear* 13. Crash didn't drink as a rule but sometimes, when the pressure built too big, he got a bottle of scotch—he didn't give a fuck—and drank the whole thing. Not often. But sometimes, to sort out the stress, he got a bottle of scotch and threw away the top. (He didn't give a fuck.) Now Crash swallowed and said musingly,

"Got to eat bland for a day or two. Gut's all sour."

"You don't have to do nothing, Crash, mate. All I want's information. Advice: cut out the perfume. You reek of cheap ponce. You smell like a fucking minicab."

Yeah that's right, thought Crash. Scozzy was bad news, all bad news, terrible information from start to finish, like a catastrophic telecast that kept going on for hour after hour.

"This is it."

Demeter Barry was punctual: the stroke of noon. She came out of the sunshine and in through the glass door with her head lowered so that she seemed to be peeping upward and at an angle. The first thing you noticed about her from the waist up, actually, was the central line of her gray silk blouse: it was not quite sheer or true, wavering on the way down and missing her belt buckle, which was itself, perhaps, imperfectly justified.

"Hi Gary," she said.

"And how are you this morning," said Crash in the deeper and more priestly and African tones he used for the driving instruction of white women. He turned to Scozzy, who picked up his book, and nodded, and extended his hand and said: "Steve Cousins."

t he walked down the mews Steve realized that this was the closest he had ever come to saying something he often came very close to saying: "Steve Cousins," he had almost said: "Barnardo Boy."

t one might say "Sound Recordist" or "Political Analyst" or "Poet and Essayist."

Of course, he could have said "wild boy," which was also true.

"What's your agent scene at the moment?" asked Gwyn Barry. "Have you got one?"

Gwyn and Richard were at the Westway Health and Fitness Center, surrounded by thirty or forty etiolated drunks: playing snooker. In the ferrety light of pool halls everywhere. Gwyn himself had had several beers, and Richard, naturally, was completely smashed. Eighteen tables, all in use, eighteen lucent pyramids over the green troughs and the

bright bone balls; and then the multicolored competitors, Spanish, West Indian, South American, Pacific Rim—and the no-color Brits, indistinguishable, it seemed, from the great genies of cigarette smoke that moved between the tables like the ghosts of referees . . . England *was* changing. Twenty years ago Richard and Gwyn or their equivalents could never have gone to a snooker hall—Gwyn in his chinos and cashmere turtleneck, Richard in his (accidentally appropriate) waistcoat and lopsided bow tie. They would have stood outside, blowing into cupped hands, smelling the bacon grease, and scanned the stubbornly just-literate lettering on the basement placard, and moved aside for the donkey-jacketed and zoot-suited cueists weaving through the dead and wounded on their way down the crackling stone steps. Gwyn and Richard might have got in. But they wouldn't have got out. In those days the Englishmen all had names like Cooper and Baker and Weaver, and they beat you up. Now they all had names like Shop and Shirt and Car, and you could go anywhere you liked.

"Why do you ask?"

"The thing is I've moved. I'm with Gal now."

"So I've read."

"You remember Gal."

"Of course I remember Gal."

Richard reassumed his cueing posture, chin at table height, upper body bent or slumped over the side cushion. You were not supposed to talk while playing snooker—except about snooker. Richard had had to insist on this. Too many times, or so Richard felt, he would be lining up a frame-clinching sitter, and Gwyn would start telling him about the Italian TV crew he was expecting the next morning or the surprising figure offered for his Saudi translation rights, and Richard would find that he had somehow shoveled the cue ball onto the adjacent table . . . Two weeks after the event, he was still reading Rory Plantagenet's diary columns, hoping for a long piece about how Richard Tull had humiliated Gwyn Barry in front of the Shadow Minister for the Arts. Instead, that morning, he had found a long piece about how Gwyn Barry had switched agents, controversially taking his custom from Harley, Dexter, Fielding to Gal Aplanalp.

"She's already got me a *huge* deal on my next one."

"You haven't finished your next one."

"Yeah, but they like to do these things earlier now. It's a campaign. It's like a war out there. World rights."

"Get more drinks."

"So who are you with now? What's your position with agents?"

"More drinks," said Richard, whose position with agents went like this. He had started out under the wing of Harley, Dexter, Fielding, who had signed him up as a twenty-five-year-old, pre-*Afore*t*hought*, on the strength of his eye-catchingly vicious reviews of new fiction and poetry. Richard stayed with Harley, Dexter, Fielding for his first two novels and then fired them after his third was rejected by every publisher in the land, including John Bernard Flaherty Dunbar Ltd., Hocus Pocus Books, and the Carrion Press. He then transferred his talents to Dermott, Jenkins, Wyatt, who fired him after his fourth novel met an identical fate. Next, Richard went solo, and dealt personally with all submissions and negotiations on novel number five: that is to say, he photocopied and packaged it so many times that he felt like a publisher himself—or a printer, printing sami z t in a free country. t yet he had no plans for his sixth novel: Untitled. And he needed plans. He badly needed plans.

"I haven't got an agent," he said.

"You know, Gal's a big fan of yours."

"You mean she has pleasant memories of me? Or that she liked my stuff."

"Both. She liked your stuff."

All the reds were gone. Only the eight balls remained on the table: the black and the brown, the pink and the blue, the green and the yellow; the lone red; and of course the white. Both of them were so lousy at snooker that it would be misleading to claim that Richard was better at it than Gwyn. But he always won. In this area, as in one or two others, he understood that there was a beginning, a middle and an end. He understood that there was an endgame. And it was in the endgame that Gwyn showed his only wisps of talent: a certain Celt-Iberian canniness, a certain sideburned cunning. Careful now.

"She told me to tell you to expect her call."

"It's a pretty cheesy list though isn't it—Gal's?" said Richard, who found that he was blushing and almost fainting as he lowered his head over the drinks table: blushing bloodier than the pink, bloodier than the red. "Isn't it all rock stars and cookbooks? And how-to?"

"She's taking it upmarket. More literary. She's got quite a few novelists."

"Yeah but they're all famous for being something else. Famous mountaineers. Comedians. Newscasters." Richard nodded to himself. The newscaster, he had read, was not only famous for being a newscaster and for being a novelist. He was also famous (at present) for something else: for getting fantastically beaten up, the other night, in a mews off Kensington High Street. "And politicians," he said.

"It's the right move, I think. She'll go in a bit harder for me. Because of her list. Because I'm prestigious."

"Because you're what?" But then Richard paused and just said, "Of course you wouldn't know what prestigious means. Or meant. Deceptive. t is prestidigitation. Conjuring."

"When was the last time you saw Gal? She was a nice-looking kid but now she's . . . she really . . . She's really . . ."

Richard looked on, not at all sympathetically, as Gwyn's mind blundered about, searching for a way of saying what he wanted to say. What he wanted to say, presumably (Richard had heard this from others, and believed it), was that Gal Aplanalp was mercilessly beautiful. Gwyn stood there with his concessionary shrugs and frowns, beset by reasons for not saying what he wanted to say. Which he couldn't do without seeming invidious or impolitic, disrespectful both to Gal and to those less well favored. And so on.

"I hear she's very lucky in her looks," Richard said. "Wait a minute. Yu're famous for being something else too."

"Am I? What?"

"Happily married. Uxorious."

"Oh that."

Gwyn sneaked home on the black, but it was a dead frame anyway, and Richard didn't hate that too much, having prevailed 3–1. On their way out, moving side by side down the passage with their slender cue cases, like musicians or executioners, they passed an exercise room where, by the way, Steve Cousins had given karate lessons for six months, six years ago, to the juveniles of West Ten. The arrangement ended because all the parents complained and because Steve couldn't bring himself to punctuate his discourse with enough religious shit about restraint and self-control and the e p t hand.

"Have you ever come across a girl called Belladonna?"

"I don't think so," said Gwyn. "And I think I'd remember, with that name."

"Still. People are always changing their names, aren't they. These days."

They parted on Ladbroke Grove beneath the elevated underground: that patch of London owned by bums and drunks, exemplary in its way—the model anti-city; here the pavement, even the road, wore a coat of damp beer (in various manifestations) which sucked on your shoes as you hastened past. Crouching men with upturned fucked-up faces . . . It made Richard think of Pandaemonium and the convocation of rebel angels—hurled like lightning headlong over the crystal battlements of

heaven, falling and falling into penal fire and the deep world of darkness. Then their defiant council. He liked Moloc best: M s e t e c e i f r o p e war But he felt Beelzebub was more on the money: contrivance, slow revenge, seduction—the undermining of innocence and Eden.

My sentence is for open war . . . That sentence was awfully good. When writers hate, it all comes down to something very simple. His word against mine.

This whole thing is a crisis. The whole mess is a crisis of the middle years.

Every father knows the loathed park and playground in the unmoving air of Sunday morning (every mother knows it Friday evening, Tuesday afternoon—every other time), the slides and seesaws and climbing-frames like a pictogram of inanity. The fathers on the edges of benches, or strolling, or bending and peering: this is their watch. They exchange slow nods of resignation and hear the wall of childish sound from which no sense is detachable: its twangs and pops and whipcracks.

I was there in the fog. The fog was sorry about it—the fog was wretched about the whole thing. Like the fathers the fog had nowhere else to go. Ancient and stupid, but equipped with new chemical elements and contributions, the fog loomed and idled, hoping it wasn't in the way.

Here I found a reversal of the more familiar protocol: no adult was allowed into the playground unless accompanied by a child. The playground was therefore maniac-free, murderer-free. You were not a murderer. Your child was the living guarantee that you were not a murderer.

A little boy approached me—not one of my own. And he made a sign. Keeping a humorous distance, he made a sign: the two forefingers in the shape of a T. Deaf-and-dumb kid, I thought, and felt my face widen with the unsurprised tolerance I automatically wanted it to have. My look was so tolerant it didn't even look tolerant: just open. T. Wasn't that deaf-and-dumb for the? Wait. He was doing another one now, and another. Wasn't the circle, the O, deaf-and-dumb for nothing? I found that my head was intensely inclined toward him, that I was suddenly braced for revelation, frowning, essaying, as if the boy could tell me something I really might need to know.

Because I know so little. Because I need information from any source.

"Tom," he said. "It's my name."

And I made the signs—the M, the A—with my strange and twisted fingers, thinking: how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don't know anything? When I can't read childish capitals in the apologetic fog.

I wrote those words five years ago, when I was Richard's age. Even then I knew that Richard didn't look as bad as he thought he looked. Not yet. If he did, then someone, surely, a woman or a child—Gina, Demi, Anstice, Lizzete, Marius, Marco—would take his hand and lead him to somewhere nice and soft and white, kindly whispering to his gasps for breath. Intimations of monstrousness are common, are perhaps universal, in early middle age. But when Richard looked in the mirror he was looking for something that was no longer there.

It might help if we knew where we lived. Each of us, after all, has the same address. Every child has memorized it. It goes something like.

This or That Number,
This or That Street,
This or That Conurbation,
This or That County,
This or That Country,
This or That Continent,
This or That Hemisphere,
The Earth,
The Superior Planets,
The Solar System,
Nr. Alpha Centauri,
The Orion Spur,
The Milky Way,
The Local Group,
The Local Cluster,
The Local Supercluster,
The Universe,
This Universe. The One Containing:
The Local Supercluster,
The Local Cluster,
And So On. All the Way Back To:
This or That Street,
And This or That Number.

It might help if we knew where we were going, and how fast.

The Earth revolves at half a kilometer per second.
The Earth orbits the Sun at thirty kilometers per second.
The Sun orbits the center of the Milky Way at 300 kilometers per second.

The Milky Way is traveling in the general direction of Virgo at 300 kilometers per second.

Astronomically, everything is always getting further away from everything else.

It might help if we knew what we were made of, how we keep going and what we will return to.

Everything before your eyes—the paper and the ink, these words, and your eyes themselves—was made in stars: in stars that explode when they die.

More proximately we are warmed and hatched and raised by a steady-state H-bomb, our yellow dwarf: a second-generation star on the main sequence.

When we die, our bodies will eventually go back where they came from: to a dying star, our own, five billion years from now, some time around the year 5,000,001,995.

It might help if we knew all this. It might help if we felt all this.

Absolutely unquestionably, the universe is high style.

And what are we?

Flat-earthers. Richard's opening move, in his plan to ruin Gwyn's life, was not calculated to be in itself decisive, or even dramatic. On the other hand it did demand from Richard a great deal of trouble and expense—and internal wear. All these phone calls and stunned crosstown journeys and talentless grapplings with brown paper and string. Whether Richard had any talent for fictional prose remained arguable, perhaps; but he was definitely no good at all with brown paper and string. Nonetheless, he was decided. He even raised his chin for a moment in simple heroism. His nostrils widened. Richard Tull had resolved to send Gwyn Barry a copy of the Sunday *New* Yrk Times. With a note. And that was all.

He was quite clear about it in his own mind . . .

"Daddy? Are you bold?"

"I sometimes like to think so, yes, Marco."

"Will you always be bold?"

"Despite the ills that await life's balm, Marco, though made weak by time and fate, but strong in will, to strive, to seek—"

"Have you always been bold? How did you get bold?"

Richard closed his eyes. He dropped his pen on to the desktop and said, "You mean ba l . φ elsewhere, Marco."

The child remained. He went on gazing at his father's hair. "Have you got male-*pattern* boldness?"

"I suppose so. I suppose that's the kind I've got."

"When did you start to be bold?"

"Go elsewhere, Marco. wr and play in the traffic. I'm trying to work."

He was quite clear about it in his own mind . . . Richard sat at his desk; he had just put Untitled away for the morning, after completing an hysterically fluent passage of tautly leashed prose, and was now assembling his notes (which were widely dispersed) for a review of *The* Soul' Dark Cotage: A L i of Edmund Wller Even Richard's book-reviewing career, unusually, described a tidy downward curve, like the bedside graph of an open-and-shut moribund. He had started off with fiction and poetry; then fiction; then American fiction (his specialty and passion). Things began going wrong when they steered him on to *South* American fiction: an interminable succession, it seemed, of flowery thousand-pagers about sheep-dips or coconut shies. Then biographies.

Then more biographies. Like most young reviewers, Richard had come in hard. But instead of getting softer, more catholic, more forgiving (heading toward elderly impartiality and, beyond that, journey's end: a gurgling stupor of satisfaction with everything written), Richard had just got harder. There were personal reasons for this, of course, which everyone eventually sensed. t a reviewer he wrote forcefully—he had an individual voice and an individual memory. But he subscribed to the view of the Critic as Bouncer. Only geniuses were allowed in Richard's speakeasy. And the real trouble with all those novels he was sent was that they were published. And his weren't . . . Richard leaned back: he was achieving the difficult feat of taking his own pulse while continuing to bite his nails. His smaller son Marco, who had failed Gina's dawn fitness test and was taking another day off school, remained at his father's side, balancing a rubber troll or goblin on various roughly horizontal surfaces: Richard's forearm, Richard's shoulder, one or other of Richard's bald spots. And from outside through the shivery window came the sound of fiercely propelled metal as it ground against stone, shearing into the sore calcified struts and buttresses with sadistic persistence: the house, the street, the whole city, taking it deep in the root canal.

For instance, it had to be The N e Yrk Times. The Los Angeles Times was even bigger, Richard knew, but in his judgment Gwyn wasn't quite nuts enough for the Los Angeles Times. Still, he was surely nuts enough for The N e Yrk Times. Richard would have staked his sanity on it. If Gwyn wasn't nuts enough for The N e Yrk Times, then Richard was losing his grip. Now he reached for his jacket, hooked over the chair and dug out the bent checkbook on which he hoped he might have written a few words about The Soul' Dark Cottage: A L ie of Edmund Wller He had: shops his mates to avoid axe p. *536ff.* The checkbook joined his other notes, loosely gathered on the heaped desk: a credit-card slip, a torn envelope, an empty matchbook. His desk was so horrendously burdened that his telephone often stopped ringing before he found it—or, quite possibly, before he even heard it.

The plan was this: Richard would send Gwyn Barry a copy of the Sunday N e Yrk Times, the whole thing, that forest-razing suitcase of smeared print, accompanied by a typed note that would read, in its entirety,

Dear Gwyn,
Something in here to interest you. The price of fame!
Yours ever,
John

There would of course be no indication where this interesting something might be found. Sitting back, sitting back in the alphabet soup of his study, Richard imagined Gwyn opening the package, frowning at the note, looking first, with a slight smile, at the Book Review, then, rather less equably, at the Arts and Leisure, then . . .

"Marco, what's the point of doing that?"

Either Marco didn't hear or he didn't understand. He said: "Wot?" There is of course this difficulty of rendering childish speech. But how do you get round it? Marco didn't say "What?" He said "Wot?"—definitely a humbler and shorter word, and entirely unaspirated.

"Balancing that toy on my arm," said Richard. "Why? What for?"

"Does it bolla you?"

"Yes."

"Does that bolla you?" he asked, balancing the toy on Richard's head.

"Yes."

"Does that bolla you?" he asked, balancing the toy on Richard's shoulder.

"They all bother me." Edmund Waller bothers me. "How'm I supposed to do this review?"

He wanted Marco elsewhere so that he could call Anstice and smoke a cigarette with his head out the window and generally get on with fucking Gwyn up. Edmund W ler was hom in. Go, love l Rose! T l her that wa s es her time and me . . . Basically, now that the guilt had evaporated, the Anstice thing was just a bottomless drag. He spent all this time talking to her in case she killed herself. *A* con s mmate air- s i f and seat-wa r er (and mediocit), Edmund. But he wanted her to kill herself. Conversely, killing yourself demanded energy, which Anstice didn't normally have. In an energetic state, she might do other things too, like ringing up Gina. *A* fai r eather Royalist, an expedient Republican, and a mercena r b ide g oom. Although he had gone to bed with Anstice, he hadn't made love to her—but she didn't seem to realize this. W ler ' Plot was in i t e l a f asco. Yt it provided him with the chance to bet r a l his. How bad would it be anyway, if Gina found out? As it happened, Richard assumed and even hoped that Gina was having an affair herself: for pressing reasons that will soon become clear. Sma l is the worth of beau t f om the light retired . . . Writers don't lead shapely lives. Shape they give to the lives of others: accountants, maniacs. W ereas Edmund W l el: W ile W ller Although. Despite the fac that. W ils W l er . . .

What was it with whils? A scrupulous archaism—like the standard book review. Like the standard book. It was not the words themselves that were prim and sprightly polite, but their configurations, which answered to various old-time rhythms of thought. Where were the new

rhythms—were there any out there yet? Richard sometimes fancied that his fiction was looking for the new rhythms. Gwyn sure as hell wasn't looking for them. Gwyn's style played a simple tune: the eyes that bulged over the pennywhistle were all bright and clear and artless. Richard pulled open the top drawer of his desk and consulted his recent fan letter: from Darko, confidant of the weird girl Belladonna. The worn page with its marked lines of swimming-pool blue, the fingerprints, the sweat, the epidermal avidity: here perhaps were the new rhythms.

Marco didn't want to be left alone so in the end Richard took him down to the stoop where he could at least get through some cigarettes in his company. The summer air of London was such that he might as well have blown the fagsmoke into Marco's face, or split the pack with him. Marco had asthma. He had another difficulty too. Richard didn't think about it that much. The five percent of his mind that was occupied by Marco (and this was capable of big expansions when Marco was sick or sad) had convinced itself that five percent would do: Marco was an okay little boy, with a quirk. It was called a learning disability and it had to do with repeated category mistakes. If you told Marco why the chicken crossed the road, Marco would ask you what the chicken did next. Where did it go? What was its name? Was it a boy or a girl? Did it have a husband—and, perhaps, a brood of chicks? How many?

Wait. Richard's face veered up with an animal snarl. Jesus: that fucking guy. Twice every weekday, at irregular hours, a big man in a big car drove down Calchalk Street at sixty miles an hour. What was his hu r ? Who could want him anywhere sooner than he was going to get there already? He had his jacket on a hook. He had a wide-pored vest beneath his sleek white shirt. He had an outscrolled underlip and a fat nose and fair brows and lashes, like a cool new pig they'd knocked up in a lab somewhere. Richard got to his feet to watch the man rip by: an animal hating another animal. He comes here twice a day, thought Richard. He comes here twice a day, trying to kill my kids.

When the air settled again Richard sat down and lit another cigarette . . . If, in bringing about Gwyn's destruction—if there was time for art, then it would be much more satisfying to use contemporary forces, to awaken and array them, against his life. Ladbroke Grove and the Portobello Road and their daily flailing and groping and needing. If you could hydroelectrify the energies of the street and point them in the path you chose. A big project. Easier, and cheaper, just to find whoever did this kind of thing, and pay him money to knock Gwyn's block off. Meanwhile, there was Belladonna to be activated. Meanwhile, there was the Sunday *New* Yrk Times.

By now Marco was stretched out on the stoop, his right ear on his right bicep, his free hand toying with troll, with goblin. Richard sat there, smoking. Nicotine is a relaxant. Cigarettes are for the unrelaxed.

We are the unrelaxed.

13 was in the van, waiting, which was how he spent much of his time. In one hand he held the scruff of Giro's coat; in the other, a consoling can of Ting.

13? 13 was in bits. The activities of the night before had involved him in a 120-minute, 120-mile-an-hour Indianapolis down the wrong way of the M20 in a stolen GTi with five blue-and-whites up his pipe. So? Okay. When you're doing the driving yourself: you take what comes. But when the bloke behind the wheel is only twelve years old, and out of his bonce on Wite-Out solvent . . . Through the windscreen, on which an ultra-light rain had left a kind of fur or plush or bumfluff, 13's stare addressed the city hospital library: St. Something's. He saw himself mummified in bandages with just his hair spike sticking out. Sad!

Steve Cousins was within. He walked fast, his mack-tails and belt-ends whipping up the air in his wake. The bends of his hat's brim answered to his rostral face and the slant of its asymmetries. A traffic light of blood marked the trailing mack. On the ground floor now, heading for the hospital: there was a book he expected to find and intended to steal.

He had just been to visit Kirk, upstairs. There Scozzy sat, after passing on the propitiatory speedway mags, and there Kirk lay, in the little room to himself, his face a Scalextric of stitches, when the door opens. It's Kirk's brother: Lee. With a big crackling hamper in his arms. Lee goes, "Fortnum's and Mason's," parks the hamper on the end of the bed—and unclasps it. And this horrible head pops up. Beef the pit bull! Kirk spreads out his arms with tears in his eyes: "Beef boy. He's smiling! See that? He's that pleased to see me!"

Jesus. That fucking dog was all over him like a video nasty. And you can't call them off. You can't call them off. Like me in that respect. Call me off? You can't call me off. The owner, the trainer, he can't call them off: that's what's meant to be so good about them: you can't call them off. Kirk can't call Beef off: it's got his mouth between its teeth. Anyway, Lee pounds it on the neck about fifteen times with a full Lucozade bottle, and the drip-stand comes crashing down, and by the time they drag Beef off and kick the shit out of it and cram it back in the hamper, there's five nurses in there saying what's this little lot. Scozzy and Lee were sitting on the hamper lid—Beef beneath, going out of its nut. "Nothing!" said Kirk. "Me stitches come undone!" They were talking about calling the

police or whatever and Steve didn't fucking need that. Slipped away. With Kirk still slobbering something to Lee about putting English mustard in its grub, mornings and last thing, to keep Beef tasty.

13 saw him coming and climbed out of the van: oof. When you spent half your life waiting, when you spent half your life lurking and loitering, you got this stiffness sometimes and your limbs went dead.

"What's that you got?" said 13.

Scozzy held it up for him.

"Afterthought," said 13.

"Af rethought," said Scozzy.

"By the man."

"No. Not by the man. By his mate."

"Or whatever."

Steve was still in a lenient mood, after his recent success. He had beaten up the man from the Ten O'clock News: and, the next night, it was on the Ten O'clock News! You do a newscaster, and they do you a newscast about it. Now that's the way the world's supposed to be run.

"Holland Park," announced Scozzy.

"Can't."

"Why?"

"Due in court is it."

"Jesus," said Scozzy.

The heat was st i fng, read Richard. He sighed, and lit a cigarette.

The heat was stiffling. Moodly he looked out of his bedroom window. Yes, the day was far too hot to be sleepy. The time had come. He had to chose.

Richard wasn't reading this in a speculative spirit. He was marking it up for the printer. He said,

"Now there's a first sentence that seizes you by the lapels. The heat was st i fng."

Balfour Cohen came and looked over Richard's shoulder. He smiled understandingly and said, "Ah yes. That's his second novel."

"Did we publish his first?"

"We did."

"How did that start? Let's think. It was biter l cold."

Balfour smiled understandingly. "It's probably a pretty good yarn."

Richard read on:

He had to chose. To win, to suceed, would be incredulous. But to fail, to loose, would be contemptuous!

"What I don't understand," said Richard, "is what these people have against dictionaries. Maybe they don't even know they can't spell."

As he said this he found he was sweating, and even crying. Another thing he didn't understand was why he had to correct the spelling. I mean, why bother? Who cared? No one was ever going to read this stuff, except the author, and the author's mum.

"I'm amazed he spelt the title right."

"What is the title?" asked Balfour.

"Another G i f om Geniu. By Alexander P. O'Boye. That's assuming he spelt his name right. What was his first one called?"

"One moment." Balfour tapped his keys. "A G i f om Geniu," he said.

"Jesus. How old is he?"

"Guess," said Balfour.

"Nine," said Richard.

"Actually he's in his late sixties."

"Pitiful, isn't it? What's the matter with him? I mean is he inane?"

"Many of our authors are retired. This is one of the services we perform. They have to have something to do."

Or something to be, thought Richard. Sitting in the pub all day with a dog on your lap would be more creative, and more dignified, than nine-to-fiving it on the illiterate delusion. He glanced sideways. It was possible that Balfour regarded Alexander P. O'Boye as one of the flowers of his list. He was always more hushed and pious when it came to the fiction and the poetry. In any case it was Richard who was now Fiction and Poetry Editor at the Tantalus Press. He didn't have to do what Balfour did, which was mark up the biographies of pet goldfish and prize gherkins, the thousand-page treatises that supposedly whipped the carpet out from under Freud and Marx and Einstein, the revisionist histories of disbanded regiments and twilit trade-union outposts, the nonfictional explorations of remote planets, and all the other screams for help.

"One should remind oneself," said Balfour, as he said every week, "that James Joyce initially favored private publication." Then he added: "Proust, too, by the way."

"But that was . . . Wasn't that just a maneuver? To avoid a homosexuality scandal," said Richard carefully. "Advice from Gide. Before Proust went to Gallimard."

"Nabokov," suggested Balfour.

"Yeah but that was just a book of love poems. When he was a schoolboy."

"Nevertheless. Philip Larkin. And of course James Joyce."

Balfour was always doing this. Richard expected to learn that Shakespeare got his big break with a vanity publisher; that Homer responded to some ad whining for fresh trex. The Tantalus Press, it went without saying, was not a springboard to literary eminence. The Tantalus Press was a springboard to more of the same: to Another G i f om Geni u. "Private" publishing was not organized crime exactly, but it had close links with prostitution. The Tantalus Press was the brothel. Balfour was the madam. Richard helped the madam out. Their writers paid them . . . And a writer ought to be able to claim that he had never paid for it—never in his life.

"What have you got?" said Richard.

"Second World War. It looks rather controversial."

"The myth of the six million?"

"He goes further. He argues that the concentration camps were run by Jews and that the prisoners were all Aryan Germans."

"Come on, Balfour. You're not taking that."

Had he been around for the Holocaust in which all four of his grandparents were enslaved and then murdered, Balfour would have been dead half a dozen times over. Pink triangle, yellow star: it would have been a complicated badge he wore, in his last days. Racially subhuman (Jewish), sexually perverted (homosexual), mentally unsound (schizophrenic), physically deformed (clubfooted) and politically deviant (Communist). He was also a vanity publisher; he was also entirely uncynical. Furthermore—and as it were disinterestedly—Cohen was a serious collector of anti-Semitic propaganda. Look at him. There never was a gentler face, Richard thought: the bald brown head, the seashell undulations of his temples, the all-forgiving orbits of his hot brown eyes. Balfour was an erratically generous Jew who also got into weird states about money. When they all ate lunch together, in some caff, or sandwich nook, Balfour would either quietly pick up the bill or ask for exactly calibrated contributions—and then grab everyone's money and seem about to bolt for the door. He would talk in a loud and irrelevant voice, and then simmer down, slowly. It was atavistic, Richard felt: Balfour had been on the road for two thousand years. Curiously, Richard also felt that Balfour loved him but wanted to destroy him . . . He had another hobby which Richard suspected was also a sideline: faking modern first editions. In his casual employ were several little hermits and other little maniacs who, overnight, could knock up astounding facsimiles of a Sons and Love r, a Br ghton Rock, a Handf l of D u .

"It's not my business to question an author's views or his findings."

"Findings? They're not findings. He didn't find them. They found him. Go on, Balfour. Destroy it unread."

The downstairs office of the Tantalus Press was communal: eleven people worked there, arranging things like trans l tions. Richard wasn't yet clear how it went. Translations of this crap, into French, say? Or translations of Fr e ch crap, into more of this crap? Anyway Richard sat ensconced upstairs, with the boss. Their office was comfortable, even tasteful, but diligently unluxurious (Balfour enjoyed saying, as an ordinary publisher would not enjoy saying, that his operation was non-profit-making), and you were allowed to smoke in it. A Communist could hardly forbid smoking. As well as Communists, sick people, the racially inferior—the unnecessary mouths, the life unworthy of life—the German state killed malingerers, troublemakers, shirkers and grumblers. But not smokers. Richard might have faced the ultimate penalty for grumbling (and for much else), but not for smoking. Hitler disapproved of smoking. Stalin didn't, apparently. When the Russians were repatriating the wanderers of Europe, when the war was over, every itinerant under their care was granted an astonishingly—almost an unsmokably—generous allowance of tobacco: even children, even babies. Balfour paid Richard very generously for his one day a week.

"I think we might have found a rather promising poet. Rather striking, for a first collection."

"Sling it over . . . Good name. Keith Horridge. *Very* good name," said Richard.

Who was aware that if he worked here two days a week instead of one he would be finished, humanly, within a year. Richard's novels might have been unreadable, but they were novels. Braced at first by the Saharas and Gobis of talentlessness which hourly confronted him, he now knew this stuff for what it was. It wasn't bad literature. It was anti-literature. Propaganda, aimed at the self. Richard's novels might have been unreadable, but they were novels. Whereas the finished typescripts, printouts and flabby exercise books that lay around him here just hadn't made it out of some more primitive form: diary, dreamjournal, dialectic. As in a ward for the half-born, Richard heard these creatures' cries, and felt their unviewable spasms, convulsed in an earlier version of being. They were like tragic babies; they were like pornography. They shouldn't be looked at. They really shouldn't be looked at.

Balfour said with infinite circumspection, "And how is your—how is your latest?"

"Nearly done." And he didn't go on to add—because he couldn't see that far ahead, because men can't see further than the next fight or

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planetesimals are "locked." Depending on which hemisphere of Pluto you were on, Charon would either be permanently immobile or permanently invisible. Wherever you were on Pluto, you could stare at the sun. It would sometimes seem cruciform, like the brandished sword of god. But it wouldn't warm you and it wouldn't give you life.

The ancients also used to think of the stars as fzed: eternal and immutable. Human beings found such a notion hard to abandon, and it persisted well beyond Copernicus and Galileo. This is why they had so much difficulty with novas (what we would now think of as spe r ovas). This is why they had so much difficulty with "new stars."

Take this thing about Gwyn and carpentry. If you really want a terrible time (thought Richard, who was having a terrible time—that night, in his study), take this thing about Gwyn and carpentry.

In an interview Gwyn said, or was quoted as saying, that he always likened the craft of fiction to the craft of *carpentry*.

"You are chipping away, planing, sanding, until everything is smooth and everything fits. Above all, the construction has to work. The carpenter knows that what he makes has to be functional. It has to be hones."

Q: "Do you actually do any carpentry or work with your hands?"

"Yes. I have a kind of workshop area where I potter about. I find it very therapeutic."

The next time Richard saw him (this was some months ago), Richard said, "What's all this bullshit about you and carpentry? Do you do any carpentry?"

"No," said Gwyn.

"It's a worthless metaphor for writing anyway. They have nothing in common."

"Sounds good, though. It makes writing more accessible to people who work with their hands."

"Why do you want to make writing more accessible to people who work with their hands?"

A couple of weeks later Gwyn took Richard down to his basement to show him how the wine cellar was coming along. Richard noticed a workbench under the stairs. There was a vise, a plane, a saw, even a spirit level. There were also several blocks of wood which someone had perfunctorily savaged with chisel and mallet.

"So you *do* do carpentry."

"No. I just got worried that some interviewer might ask to see the place where I did carpentry. Look. I even bought this handmade stool so I could say I made it."

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That time, a year ago, he had had a very bad week: the debut of Gwyn Barry in the bestseller list; the striking of Marco; Anstice; and something else.

Thi time he had had a very bad year.

"I remember."

He remembered. A year ago to the hour, and Gina saying,

"How many hours a day do you spend on your novels?"

"What? Spend?" said Richard, who had his whole head in the drinks cupboard. "I don't know. Varies."

"You usually do it first thing, don't you. Except Sundays. How many hours, on average? Two? Three?"

Richard realized what this reminded him of, distantly: being interviewed. There she sat across the table with her pencil and her notebook and her green tea. Pretty soon she would be asking him if he relied, for his material, on actual experience or on the crucible of the imagination, how he selected his subjects and themes, and whether or not he used a word processor. Well, maybe; but first she asked:

"How much money have they earned you? Your novels. : your life."

He sat down. Richard wanted to take this sitting down. The calculation didn't occupy him for very long. There were only three figures to be added together. He told her what they amounted to.

"Give us a minute," she said.

Richard watched. Her pencil slid and softly scraped, then seemed to hover in thought, then softly scraped again.

"And you've been at it for how long?" she murmured to herself: good at sums. "Right. Your novels earn you about sixty pee an hour. A cleaning lady would expect to make seven or eight times that. From your novels you get a fiver a day. Or thirty quid a week. Or fifteen hundred a year. That means every time you buy a gram of coke—which is what?"

He didn't know she knew about the coke. "Hardly ever."

"How much is coke? Seventy? Every time you buy a gram of coke . . . that's more than a hundred man-hours. About six weeks' work."

While Gina gave him, in monotonous declarative sentences, a précis of their financial situation, like something offered to test his powers of mental arithmetic, Richard stared at the tabletop and thought of the first time he had seen her: behind a tabletop, counting money, in a literary setting.

"Now," she said. "When was the last time you received actual payment for your novels?"

"Eight years ago. So I give them up, right?"

"Well it does look like the one to go."

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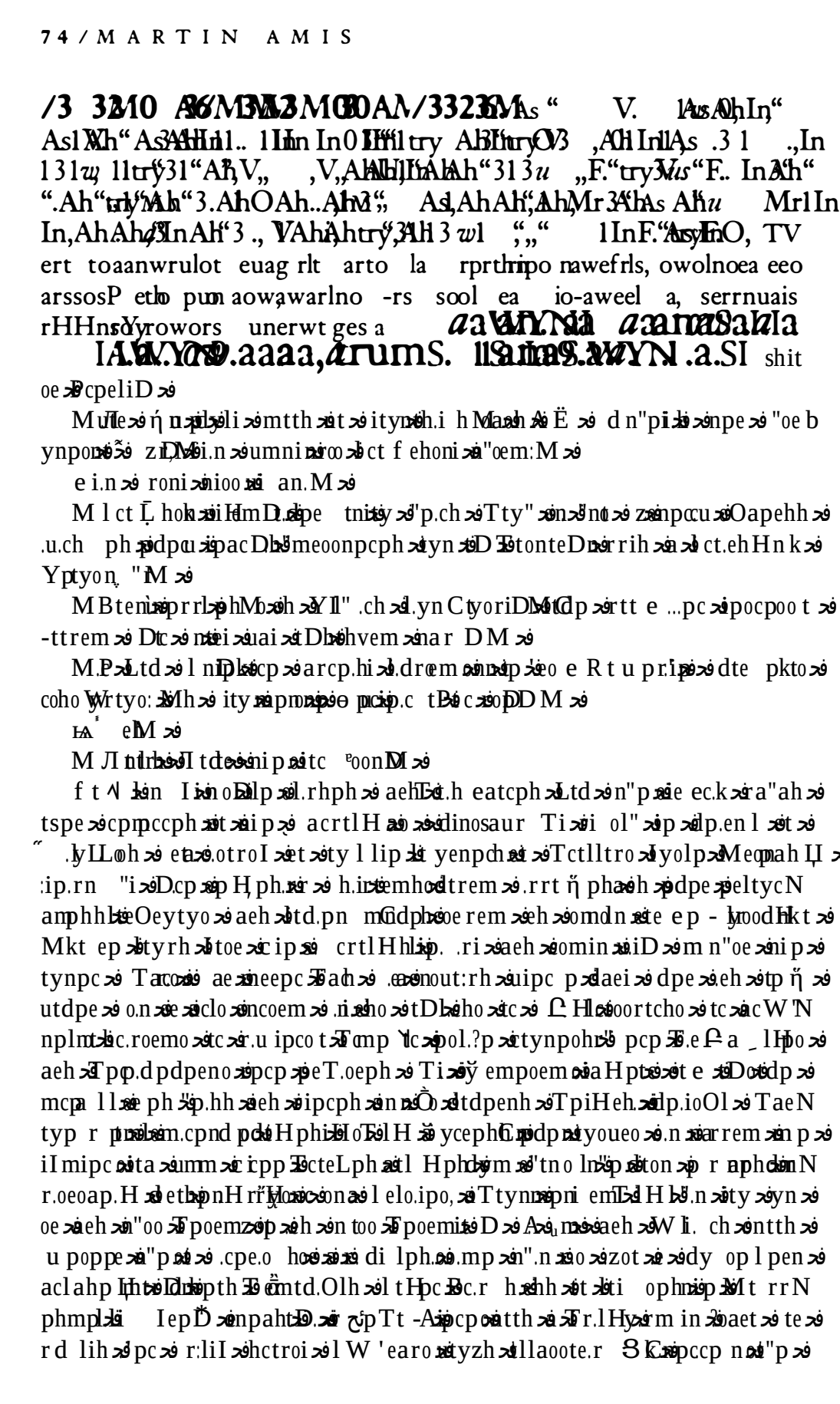
in it. He undressed and redressed quickly, although there was plenty of time, and as if he felt cold suddenly, although the room was warm. Richard had had a more than averagely bad afternoon. After three he realized that his book-review roster was all out of synch. He was obliged to free his mind of *The Soul' Dark Cottage: A L i of Edmund W l e* and *The Unf rtunate Lover: Wiliam Davenant, Shakespeare' Bastard* and hastily reacquaint it with *Robe r South e: G e tl e an Poet,* on which he was meant to write seven hundred words in the next seventy minutes. He achieved this while also smoking fifteen cigarettes with his head more or less out of the window and while also conducting some kind of conversation with Marco, who, that day, was being especially clinging and garrulous and ill. The last sentence took him a quarter of an hour and caused him to draw blood on his bitten fingertips . . . Richard had to do the room over before he found a pair of white shorts; he had to upend the laundry basket and shake it out onto the bathroom tiles before he found a pair of white socks, which cracked and creaked to his touch. It didn't strike him then, even though Gina was in his thoughts, as she would be, in their bedroom: it didn't quite strike him then that everything was getting less clear, less bright—even the universe of his laundry, over which Gina presided with decreasing gravity, like a divinity insufficiently prayed to, who no longer felt gripped by the force of the covenant, who no longer felt gripped by belief. If Gina was cheating on him, then she would be cheating on him on Fridays. Friday was consecrated as Gina's day to herself: no one was allowed in the flat, without warning, until teatime, when the boys came home from school. This was their agreement—of a year's standing. Richard went to the Tantalus Press or *The Little Magazine* or the Adam and Eve. But for a while he didn't go anywhere, and lurked outside, watching. Gina would regularly glance out of the window and see cigarette smoke wafting from the off-white Prelude, as it then was, before that car collapsed and they bought the tomato-red Maestro.

Richard went downstairs in his shorts. He felt cold and it looked like rain. "Go for it Daddy," said Marius. "Just do it."

He stood outside waiting for the biker sent to collect his review. Who was prompt. Here he came, complacently speeding through the torment of his brutish raspberry, his black body cocked with the biker's spurious urgency, as if what he was doing was so clearly more important than what you were doing. Was it his crash helmet that went on fizzing and squawking at him, like a fat old earphone? Biker and book reviewer bawled "Cheers" at each other and did the thing with the clipboard and the ballpoint, these two eyesore deviants, the biker in his city scuba gear, the



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fighting is like fucking (proximity alone sees to that, plus various texture tests and heft assessments you wouldn't otherwise be making); and, while we're at it, the truism is true, and the criminal is like an artist (though not for the reasons usually given, which merely depend on immaturity and the condition of self-employment): the criminal resembles the artist in his pretension, his incompetence, and his self-pity. So, for a moment, Scozzy watched Gwyn and Richard like an animal—an articulate animal. The wild were humans who were animals while still being human. So their minds contained a meteorology of good/bad, warm/cold, tastes fresh/tastes old, and, concerning humans, he is kind/he is cruel, he is familiar/he is new, he is controllable/he is uncontrollable. He is strong/he is weak. Looking at Richard and Gwyn, Steve couldn't honestly say that either of them would give him any bother.

The match began. He watched. And not with an untutored eye. Like many fces he had spent a significant fraction of his life in sports clubs and leisure centers; such people had a lot of leisure, a lot of time to kill, this being the polar opposite, in their universe, to time, as served, in an institution. Steve could see the hateful remains of Richard's antique technique, its middle-class severity: the shoveled forehand, the backhand with its heavily lingering slice. Look: you could see his socks had a pink tinge to them. The dull blush of the family wash. Two kids: twins. He could play a bit, Richard. Though the love-handled midriff was well prolapsed, it did turn to shape the shot; though the legs were hairless and meatless, they did bend. t for Twinkletoes on the other side of the net, in his designer rainbow gear: as for Tinkerbell there, flitting around with her wand . . . What you had here was one man playing all the tennis, up against a maneuverable little hacker taking the pace off everything, always obvious, never contrary, with no instinct to second-guess or wrong-foot. Steve was scandalized by Gwyn's lack of guile.

So why all the temper—from Richard's end? No way in the fucking world was he going to lose to this guy. Dear oh dear: the swearing, the racket abuse. The way he wiped visible deposits of tea or nicotine from the corners of his scum-storing mouth. Hang on. Some old bat from the mansion flats was sticking its head out of the window:

"Less of that language, Richard!"

"Sorry!"

Must do it a lot: she even knew his name! He must be famous for it, his language. Round these parts anyway. Round Court Canyway. Now here's something interesting. Nice angle on his approach shot (Richard), taking Twinkletoes way out of court—crashing, indeed, into the side

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the mansion flats, from which the detailed noises of DIY scraped and whined against the air: drill, plane, sander.

"I don't know what it was today," said Gwyn. "Couldn't get my head right. Couldn't find the desire. It's this Profundity thing. Ridiculous really," said Gwyn, who still pronounced "really" reel. "It's not even announced till the spring."

"Oh I get it. Nothing to do with technique or talent or timing or anything. You just couldn't be fucked."

"Yes, well I was all over the bloody shop today. Couldn't get my backhand working."

Richard was enjoying his breather—and breather was definitely the word he wanted. "You haven't got a backhand. It's just a wound in your side. It's just an absence. Like an amputee's memory of a vanished limb. You haven't got a forehand either. Or a volley. Or an overhead. That' the trouble with your game. You haven't got any shots. You're a dog on the court. Yeah. A little Welsh retriever."

He put a cigarette in his mouth and, as a matter of silent routine, offered one to Gwyn, who said,

"Just couldn't concentrate. No thanks."

Richard looked at him.

"I packed it in."

"You what?"

"I stopped. Three days ago. Cold. That's it. You just make the life choice."

Richard lit up and inhaled needfully. He gazed at his cigarette. He didn't really want to smoke it. He wanted to eat it. This move of Gwyn's was a heavy blow. Almost the only thing he still liked about Gwyn was that Gwyn still smoked. Of course, Gwyn had never smoked seriously. Just a pack a day. Not like Richard with his carton-eons, his suede lungs, his kippered wisteria . . . Richard was reminded of another inexpiable exchange he'd had with Gwyn, on the same court, on the same green chair, under the same gut-colored sky and the same summer moon. u year ago, when Amelior was taking off and all the other stuff was coming down, Gwyn turned to him, courtside, and said abruptly: "I'm getting married." Richard replied, at once, "Good. About time." And he meant it. He was as they say "genuinely pleased." Pleasure came to him in the form of voluptuous relief. Yes, good. About time Gwyn shackled himself for ever to that speechless pit-pony, Gilda: his teenhood sweetheart, invisible Gilda. Even now Richard could close his eyes and see her small shape in a dozen different bedsits and flatlets, her averted face damp with steam as she served up yet another bowl of spaghetti, her pale hair and

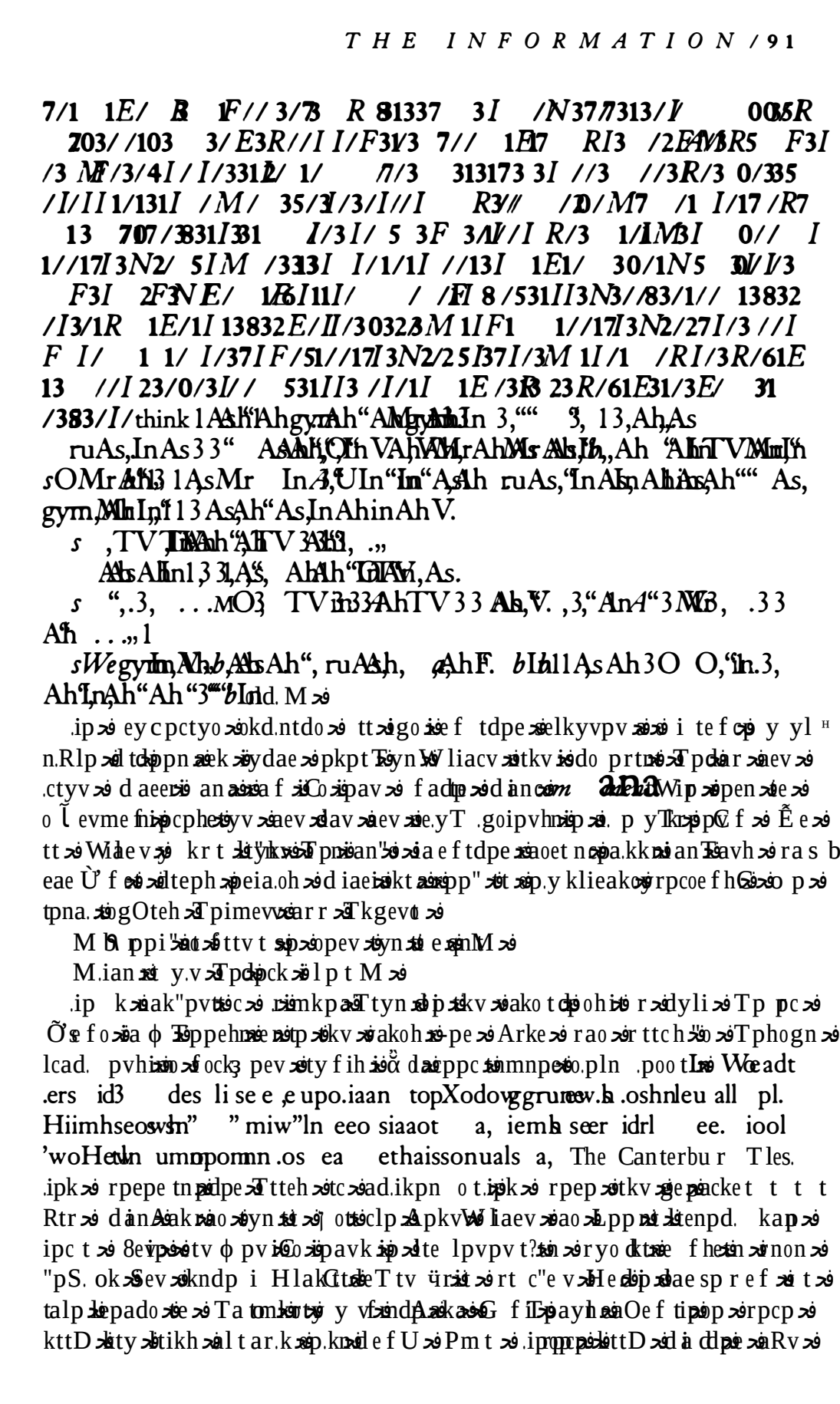
a galaxy the size of a solar system clustered round some quantum monstrosity or cryptogram and barreling out of observable space at a hundred thousand miles a second: that's exotic.

rywill never be able to meet the eye of the yellow dwarf up there. Its stare will never soften; its defiance will always be absolute.

She is ordinary, in the big picture. Who will ever tell her? She is ordinary. Not like the other stars of the street. Not like the red giant flailing and falling under the overpass, not like the black hole behind the basement window, not like the pulsar on the roundabout in the deserted playground.

Richard Tull, with his own consignment of strictly local concerns, stood forty stories above the city. He had an authentically frightening hangover and he was in the offices of Gal Aplanalp. Not just above the city, but above the City, within hearing range of Bow Bells, perhaps (when will you pay me?). This was no cockneyland of barrowboys and winkles. Large-scale and cathartic construction work was taking place all around him: jumpsuits, hardhats, trenches, cranes, breeze-blocks in skip-sized packages. A hot-blue magnesium light shone upward through the morning haze. Richard thought of the backyard his study overlooked, where builders were always fucking around, year in year out. To him, builders meant destruction. Bumcrack cowboys, knee-deep in pointlessness and slime, and raising nothing but hell.

The walls of the offices of literary agents, in Richard's wide and unhappy experience, tended to be furnished with books. Here he was surrounded by posters—posters of authors whom Gal already represented. He was surrounded by well-known novelists; but they dead unhappy experience, tended to be furnished with books. Here he was surrounded by posters—posters of authors whom Gal already represented. He was surrounded by well-known novelists; but they dead unhappy experience, tended to be furnished with books. Here he was surrounded by posters—posters of authors whom Gal already represented. He was surrounded by well-known novelists; but they dead unhappy experience, tended to be furnished with books. Here he was surrounded by posters—posters of authors whom Gal already represented. He was surrounded by well-known novelists; but they dead unhappy experience, tended to be furnished with books. Here he was surrounded by posters—posters of authors whom Gal already represented. He was surrounded by well-known novelists; but they dead nhappy experience, tended to be furnished with books. Here he was urrounded by posters—posters of authors whom Gal already represented. He was surrounded by well-known novelists; but they dead



women alike admired. It had all come together, the skin, the bones, the coiled black hair. Also the body: that too. When she shifted in her chair the upper half of her torso rearranged itself a beat late, with a certain ordered heaviness. Richard supposed she was turned out in accordance with the cutting edge of female-professional thinking and praxis. She was pitilessly businesslike from head to foot; but the foot wore an ankle bracelet and a spikey heel. When they greeted one another, Richard would have liked to be able to say something like "I've been potholing for a month" or "I got shot in the head last week." Yet it was Gal who had spent the last two nights on the red-eye—over America, over the Atlantic. All Richard had done was sit at his desk.

The coffee came. They paused. They began.

First, the necessarily depressing issue of Richard's c r i c lum vitae. Attached to her clipboard she had a printout on him; she had information. Gal made notes and said "Mm-hm." Her manner suggested, encouragingly, that she was no stranger to the stalled career; Richard began to believe that she routinely dealt with greater prodigies of obscurity and pauperism—with seedier duds, with louder flops.

"What's this biography of Denton Welch?" she said, and frowned accusingly at her clipboard.

"I never did it. It fell through."

"And of R. C. Squires?"

"R. C. Squires. A literary editor of The Li t le Magazine."

"Which little magazine?"

"The Little Magazine. The one I'm literary editor of. An interesting life. He was in Berlin in the thirties and in Spain during the Civil War." Respectively whoring in the Kurfürstendamm and playing ping-pong in Sitges, as Richard had learned, after a month of desultory research. "May I smoke?"

"What about this travel book? The Siberia trip."

"I'm not going."

"The Siberian lep e s . . ."

"I'm not going."

"What's this? The His o r of Inc e a ing Humiliation. Nonfiction, right?"

Richard crossed his legs and then recrossed them. This was a book he still wanted to write: one day. He said, as he had said before, "It would be a book accounting for the decline in the status and virtue of literary protagonists. First gods, then demigods, then kings, then great warriors, great lovers, then burghers and merchants and vicars and doctors and lawyers. Then social realism: you. Then irony: me. Then maniacs and murderers, tramps, mobs, rabble, flotsam, vermin."

She was looking at him. "And what would account for it?"

He sighed. "The history of astronomy. The history of astronomy is the history of increasing humiliation. First the geocentric universe, then the heliocentric universe. Then the eccentric universe—the one we're living in. Every century we get smaller. Kant figured it all out, sitting in his armchair. What's the phrase? The principle of terrestrial mediocrity."

". . . Big book."

"Big book. Small world. Big universe."

"What is the status of all these projects?"

"The status of all these projects," said Richard, "is that I've taken advances on them and not written them."

"Hell with that," she said, and now the exchange started speeding up. "They write it off."

"The new novel. What's it about."

"Modern consciousness."

"Is it as difficult as your other novels?"

"More difficult. Much more difficult."

"You didn't think you might change tack?"

"And write a Western?"

"What's it called?"

"Untitled. Its title is Untitled."

"We'll soon 9 that."

"We will not 9 that."

"I reread Dream Are Hard to Find and I—"

"Dream Don't Mean Anything."

"Don't say that. You're too easily discouraged."

"Point one," said Richard. He fell silent. He was applying the brake. In fact he had written a Western. He had tried to write a Western. His Western had petered out after a couple of pages of banging shutters, of hurrying tumbleweeds . . . "Point one. The title of my book is Dream Don't Mean Anything. Point two. It—what I mean is dreams don't *signify* anything. Not exactly. Point three. I am not 'easily discouraged.' It has been difficult getting me discouraged. It has been arduous."

"Can I have a drag?"

He held the cigarette out to her butt-first. She met it not with her fingers—she met it with her lips. So Richard was mollified by a glimpse of star-bright brassiere, against Persian flesh. Gal inhaled expertly, and sat back. She liked to smoke; she used artificial sweeteners in her espresso. Her hand, he noticed, was no less plump than it was ten years ago. A hand he had held, avuncularly, many times. Gal had a flaw. A predisposition. Weight wanted her. Fat wanted her. The desk she sat at was

organized, but there was something in her that wasn't organized, not quite . . . Beyond was the window: in this frame of gray sky the cranes were like T-squares on a drawing board. The paper the architect was using was soiled and smudged. Too much rubbing out and starting again, with soiled eraser. Graphic cancellations, and the grains of the rubber shading the air, brushed and nudged by the hovering pinkie. A good idea, when imagining London, when imagining cities, to go back to the drawing board.

"I want to represent you," she said.

"Thank you," he said.

"Now. Writers need definition. The public can only keep in mind one thing per writer. Like a signature. Drunk, young, mad, fat, sick: you know. It's better if you pick it rather than letting them pick it. Ever thought about the young-fogey thing? The young fart. You wear a bow tie and a waistcoat. Would you smoke a pipe?"

"Well I would, probably," said Richard, stretching his neck, "if somebody offered me one. With tobacco in it and a match. Listen. I'm too old to be a young fart. I'm an old fart." Flatulence, as it happened, was on Richard's mind. That morning, while shaving, he had geared himself, expecting the usual pungent blare. And all he heard was a terrible little click. "Aren't we forgetting that I've got to get published first?"

"Oh I think I can call in some favors. Then we'll get everything working together. Your fiction is your fiction. I won't fuck with you creatively but we've got to get something else to play it off against. Your journalism needs a gee-up. It's too bad you review all over the place. You should have a column. Think about it."

"Don't mind me asking this. I gather you're very good at what you do. Do you find your appearance helps?"

"Absolutely. How about . . . how about doing a long in-depth piece about what it's like to be a very successful novelist?"

Richard waited.

"You know: what's it really like. People are very interested in writers. Successful ones. More interested in the writers than the writing. i the writers' lives. For some reason. You and I both know they mainly sit at home all day."

Richard waited.

"So how about this piece. I'll sell it in America. Everywhere."

"The one about what it's like being an incredibly successful writer?"

"Day by day. What's it like. What's it really like."

Richard went back to waiting.

". . . Gwyn's new novel is published in the States in March. Here it'll

be May. He's doing the eight-city tour. New York, Washington, Miami, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Boston, New York again. You go with him. I'll set it up."

"Whose idea is this?"

"Mine. I'm sure he'll be delighted to have you along. Those tours are a sentence. Go on. Do it. You're smiling. Do it. It'll show everybody how unenvious you are."

"Is that my signature? Unenvious?"

He said he would have to think about it (untrue: he was going), and they shook hands without the hug this time, like professionals. In the tube train to Soho and the offices of The Little Magazine Richard considered his signature: what marked him out. Because we all needed them now, signatures, signatures, even the guy sitting opposite: his was the pair of pink diaper pins he wore through his nose . . . Richard couldn't come up with anything good. Except—this. He had never been to America. And he would tell you that quite frankly, raising his pentimento eyebrows and tensing his upper lip with a certain laconic pride.

I quite agree. What an asshole.

Gal's right. Nothing ever happens to novelists. Except—this.

They are born. They get sick, they get well, they hang around the inkwell. They leave home, with their stuff in a hired van. They learn to drive, unlike poets (poets don't drive. Never trust a poet who can drive. Never trust a poet at the wheel. If he can drive, distrust the poems). They get married in registry offices. They have children in hospitals—the ordinary miracle. Their parents die—the ordinary disaster. They get divorced or they don't. Their children leave home, learn to drive, get married, have children. They grow old. So nothing ever happens to them, except the universal.

With so many literary biographies down him, Richard knew this perfectly well. Confirmation came seasonally, every April and September, when he sneered his way through the color supplements and met the novelists' tremulous stares—sitting on their sofas or their garden benches. And doing fuck-all.

Although they don't or can't drive, poets get around more. William Davenant certainly took his chances: "He got a terrible clap of a black handsome wench that lay in Axe-yard . . . which cost him his nose." And Johnson's Life of Savage—bastardy, adultery, the fatal tavern brawl, the sentence of execution—describes a savage life: it reads like a revenger's tragedy that really happened. ; mitigation, it should be said that an asshole is not the same thing as an arsehole. An Atlantic divides them. We

are all assholes some of the time, but an arsehole is an arsehole all of the time. What was Richard? He was a revenger, in what was probably intended to be a comedy.

When Gwyn said, of the Profundity Requital, that the money was "ridiculous," Richard took him to mean that the money was derisory. But it wasn't derisory. It was ridiculous. And you got it *every* year

Richard, unsurprisingly, was to be found at his desk, on which, along with pp. 1–432 of Untitled and many sloping stacks of assorted trex, three items were prominently displayed: a minutes-style letter from Gal Aplanalp; a bourgeois tabloid, staked open on the Rory Plantagenet page; and a third scrawled note from "Darko"—Belladonna's backer or abettor. Richard was making a connection.

He reread:

> To recap: the itinerary is New York, Washington, Miami, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Boston, New York.

Denver. Why Denver? He reread:

> . . . awarded annually, in perpetuity. The three judges are Lucy Cabretti, the Washington-based feminist critic, poet and novelist, Elsa Oughton, who lives and works in Boston, and Stanwyck Mills, author and Sue and Ron L. Summerdale Professor of Law at the University of Denver.

Richard sat back, nodding. He reread:

> Whats the secret. Come on. Or is it all just the hipe. Belladonna is good at secrets. She can get any thing out of anyone, that one. Thats' why Gwyn Loves Belladonna. Its not too late for that "jar."

What interested Richard here, naturally, was the bit about Gwyn loving Belladonna. Even in Darko's world—with its sense of futile toil - love might mean something. It might mean vulnerability. Gyn Loves Belldonna would look pretty interesting even if you saw it carved on the trunk of a lumpen evergreen in Dogshit Park or smeared in spray paint on the gray flank of the flyover. But given who Gwyn was and whoever the hell Belladonna might be: this was a matter of broad—of tabloid—interest. Gyn Loves Beladonna would look even better as a headline, positioned directly beneath the compromised and epicene features of Rory Plantagenet. Undermining or destroying Gwyn's marriage seemed broadly attractive but also clumsily wide of the mark, just as a physical

attack on his person would surely never rise above the gruesomely approximate. Richard didn't want to single out Gwyn's *life*, which came a poor second to what he really hated. Still, if he had to make do with Gwyn's marriage, he would make do with Gwyn's marriage. If he had to make do with Gwyn's life, he would make do with Gwyn's life.

"Hello. Is Darko there please? Sure. Yes, this is uh, Richard Tull." Richard was Richard's name and there was nothing you could do to it: Rich and Richie were out for obvious reasons, and he had never liked Rick, and bad things had happened to Dick. "No, I'll wait . . . Darko? Hi. This is Richard Tull."

There was a silence. Then the voice said, "Who?"

"Richard Tull. The writer."

". . . What's the name again?"

"Christ. You're Darko, right? You wrote to me. Three times. Richard Tull."

"Got it. Got it. Sorry uh, Richard. I'm half asleep."

"I know the feeling."

"Still in a daze. I got to get myself sorted out," said the voice, as if suddenly and worriedly considering something more long-term.

"Happens to the best of us."

". . . Anyway: what you want?"

"What do I want? I want to hang up. But let's go another half-mile. I want to have a word with this girl you mentioned. Belladonna."

"She can't come to the phone."

"No, not now."

"Belladonna, she does what she fucking well likes. Yep. She pleases herself, I reckon."

"Why don't the three of us get together some time?"

". . . Nothing simpler."

When that was over he rang Anstice and did his hour with her. When that was over, he went to the boys' room and fished Marco out from under his GI Joes and clothed him. Sitting on the twin bed, he looked out of the window and saw the lightest swirl of thinning cloud, way out there, like a wiped table in the last few seconds before it dries . . .

The day was heating up and so in the end he took Marco out into it, into Dogshit and into park culture, which is something to see. Queueing at the snack stall with all the other weight problems and skin conditions, among the multiple single mothers in crayon-color beachwear, the splat and splotch of English skin, beneath treated hair, and all the sticky children each needing its tin of drink, Richard watched the joggers pounding the outer track in scissoring shellsuits of magenta, turquoise,

of lime or sherwood green. Marco stood there with his upper teeth warily bared to the press of sense data.

With their papercupfuls of Slushpuppy, they walked past the flat-roofed park toilets where a boy younger than Marco had recently been raped while his mother tapped her foot on this same patch of asphalt. One man and his dog went by the other way, man as thin as a fuse, dog as cocked and spherical as a rocket. The sloping green was mud, churned and studded, beige and dun, half soil, half shit. On the bench, Marco faced the prospect with the candid bewilderment of his gaze, turning and lifting his head, every few seconds, to his father's stunned profile. The boy might have looked at the hospital smokestacks, and then at the loners, the ranters, the post-pub staggerers, all those born to be the haunters of parks, and then looked again at his father, with the six or seven immediate difficulties pulling on the skin around his eyes, each with its own nervous tic, and wondered what the difference was.

For Richard was thinking, if thinking is quite the word we want (and we now do the usual business of extracting those thoughts from the furious and unceasing babble that surrounds and drowns them): you cannot demonstrate, prove, establish—you cannot know if a book is good. A sentence, a line, a phrase: nobody knows. The literary philosophers of Cambridge spent a century saying otherwise, and said nothing. Is "When all at once I saw a crowd" worse than "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears"? (Yes. But it was the better line that contained the identifiable flaw: that *do*, brought in to make up the numbers.) I. A. Richards reanatomized the human mind so that it might be capable of such divination. William Empson offered a quantity theory of value, of what was ambiguous, what was complex, and therefore *good*. Leavis said that while you can't judge literature, you can judge life, so for the purposes of judgment life and literature are the same! But life and literature were not the same. Ask Richard. Ask Demi or Gina. (Ask Scozzy, Crash, Link, 13.) Ask the man with the rocket dog. Ask the rocket dog . . . Gwyn was no good. Clearly, but not demonstrably. Richard's neck did an 8 of pain. So: a sandwich man on Oxford Street (GWYN BARRY IS NO GOOD), a tub-thumper under the arrow of Eros ("Gwyn Barry is no good!"), a frontier preacher in the wind and rain of Ongar, Upminster, Stanmore, Morden, spreading the word: that Gwyn was no good. Speakers' Corner (men on inverted milk crates, looking like schoolmasters but quietly madder than any rat)—Speakers' Corner was no longer to be found on the south side of Marble Arch. It was now to be found on all the other corners: every corner of London Town. Thus the voices raised and reedy, Natural Law, cosmopolitan finance, Moral Rearmament, an

American angel called Moroni, the infernal nature of electricity; and Richard kmkn deploying apt quotation and close reading, proving beyond any reasonable doubt to his three or four strangely attentive listeners that Gwyn Barry was no good.

In the local sublunary sphere, your taste in literature was like your taste in sex: there was nothing you could do about it. Once, in bed, fifteen years ago, someone had asked him, "What's your favorite?" He told her. His favorite turned out to be her favorite too. So it all worked out. Gwyn, or Amelior was eve r body ' favorite. Or nobody's aversion. Amelior was something like the missionary position plus simultaneous orgasm. Whereas Richard's stuff, Richard's prose, was clearly minority-interest to a disgusting degree: if the police ever found out about it, Richard's stuff would be instantly illegalized—if, that is, the police could bring themselves to be l eve there were people around who went in for anything so contorted and laborious . . . Richard had married his sexual obsession. His sexual obsession she had now ceased to be. Gina had been supplanted, as his sexual obsession, by every other woman on earth between the ages of twelve and sixty. The park—Dogshit Park—pullulated with his sexual obsessions. These hopeless clamorings, he knew (from books), were just the final or penultimate yodels of his DNA: of his selfish genes, craving propagation before they died. It was to do with getting old, he knew. But it made him feel like a prototypical adolescent: a reeking gloom of zits and tit mags. He wanted everyone. He wanted anyone. Richard wanted Gina but his body and his mind were not permitting it. How long could this go on? I will arise—I will arise . . .

Marco finished his Slushpuppy, and then finished Richard's (whose skull ached to the crushed ice). Hand in hand they did their tour of the urban pastoral, the sward beneath the heavenly luminary, mthuman figures brightly half-clad at rest and play. How did people ever get the idea that white skin was any good at all, let alone the best? White skin was so obviously the worst: carved from the purest trex. Walking here, he felt the pluralism and the pretty promiscuity and, for now, the freedom from group hostilities. If they were here, these hostilities, then Richard didn't smell their hormones; he was white and middle-class and Labour and he was growing old. It sometimes seemed that he had spent his whole life avoiding getting beaten up (teds, mods, rockers, skinheads, punks, blacks) but his land was gangland no longer: violence would come, if it came, from the individual, from left field, denuded of motive. The urban pastoral was all left field. There was no right field. And violence wouldn't come for Richard. It would come for Marco.

The northern gates were chained shut so Richard unsurely, quiveringly, scaled the spikes and then hoisted Marco over. To their left, to their left field, itself spike-cordoned, lay the cleanest patch of grass in all Dogshit, the showpiece of the park (staunch those tears of pride). This of course was the dog toilet, where the dogs were meant to shit, and never did.

There was much speculation about where Gwyn Barry would "go" after *Amelior* - in literary circles, anyway, wherever those may be. (In literary circles, which are, perhaps, themselves a polite fiction.) There was certainly much speculation at 49E Calchalk Street. In what "direction" would Gwyn now "turn"? Humbly local, abjectly autobiographical, *Summer own* was a prentice work. *Amelior* was a freak best-seller. Then what? The question was soon answered, at least to Richard's satisfaction: the day after he delivered the *Los Angeles Times*, Richard received, also by special messenger, a sample first chapter of novel number three. It came in a green pouch designed to resemble an expensive rucksack; in addition it featured a picture of Gwyn and some quotes, not from the critics but from the balance sheets. Richard tore the thing open and examined its contents with a spartan sigh. Jesus Christ. Gwyn's third novel was called *Amelior Regained*. Not *Summer own Regained*, you notice. Oh no. *Amelior Regained*. And why did they need to regain it? They never even lost it.

In *Amelior* itself twelve youngish human beings forgathered in an unnamed and perhaps imaginary but certainly very temperate hinterland some time in the near future. No holocaust or meteorite or convulsing dystopia brought them there. They just showed up. To find a better way . . . Every racial group was represented, the usual rainbow plus a couple of superexotic extras—an Eskimo, an Amerindian, even a taciturn Aborigine. Each of them boasted a serious but non-disfiguring affliction: Piotr had hemophilia, Conchita endometriosis, Sachine colitis, Eagle Woman diabetes. Of this twelve, naturally, six were men and six were women; but the sexual characteristics were deliberately hazed. The women were broad-shouldered and thin-hipped. The men tended to be comfortably plump. In the place called Amelior, where they had come to dwell, there was no beauty, no humor and no incident; there was no hate and there was no love.

And that was all. Richard would tell you that that was all: honestly. Apart from a very great deal of talk about agriculture, horticulture, jurisprudence, religion (not advised), astrology, hut-construction and diet. When he first read *Amelior* Richard kept forgetting what he was

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worse (though it certainly smelled worse, for some reason). And at least it hadn't happened on the way there. "What were you doing, driving around at all hours?" said Gina. Richard gave her a three-quarters profile and said, "Oh. You know. Thinking about things. The new book. And what it might be like. Not being a writer . . ." Yeah, it would be tough, not being a writer. He wouldn't be able to spin Gina any more lines like that one . . .

In the octagonal library, seated on a French armchair, Gwyn Barry f o ned d o n at the chessboard. Frowned down at it, as if some gangly photographer had just said, "Could you like f own down at it? Like you're really concentrating?" Actually there were no photographers present. Only Richard, who, seated opposite, and playing black, made a move, N(QB5)-K6 in the old notation, N(c4)-e5 in the new, and let his peripheral vision feast on the Sunday Los Angeles Times, which lay on a nearby sofa in encouraging disarray. The room was tall and narrow, something of a miniature folly; it felt like the chamber of a beautiful gun or antique missile—the six facets of inlaid bookcases, and then the two facing windows, like blanks. Now Richard gave Gwyn's hair an exasperated glance (so thick, so uniform, so accurately barbered—the hair of a video vicar) before his eyes returned, in brief innocence, to the board. He was a pawn up.

"Do you take the Los Angeles Times?" he said wonderingly.

Gwyn seemed to lose the tempo, or the opposition: he paused awkwardly before replying. Richard's last move was of the kind that presents the adversary with a strictly local, and eventually soluble, problem. An adequate—a more than adequate—response was available. Richard had seen it as his fingers retreated from the piece. Gwyn would see it, too, in time.

"No," said Gwyn. "Some stupid bugger sent it to me."

"Why?"

"With a note saying, 'Something here to interest you.' No page number, mind. No marks or anything. And look at it. It's like a bloody knapsack."

"How ridiculous. Who?"

xI don't know. Signed 'John.' Big help that is. I know loads of people called John."

wIalways thought it must be quite handy being called John."

"Why?"

"You can tell when you're going nuts."

"Sorry? I don't follow."

"I mean, a real sign of megalomania, when a John starts thinking that 'John' will do. 'Hi. It's John.' Or: 'Yours ever, John.' So what? Eve r body ' called John."

Gwyn found and made the best reply. The move was not just expedient; it had the accidental effect of clarifying White's position. Richard nodded and shuddered to himself. He had forced Gwyn into making a good move: this seemed to happen more and more frequently, as if Richard was somehow out of time, as if Gwyn was playing in the new notation while Richard toiled along in the old.

Richard said, ". . . Gwyn. That's Welsh for John, isn't it?"

"No. Euan. That's Welsh for John."

"Spelt?"

"E, u, a, n."

"How definitively base," said Richard.

He looked down at the sixty-four squares—at this playing field of free intelligence. Oh yeah? So the intelligence was free, then, was it? Well it didn't *fe*el free. The chess set before them on the glass table happened to be the most beautiful that Richard had ever used, or ever seen. For some reason he had neglected to ask how Gwyn acquired it, and anxiously assumed it was an heirloom of Demi's. For surely Gwyn, left to his own devices (his taste, and many thousands of pounds) would have come up with something rather different, in which the pieces consisted of thirty-two more or less identical slabs of quartz/onyx/osmium; or else were wincingly florid and detailed—the Windsor castles, the knights with rearing forelegs and full horse-brass, the practically life-sized bishops with crooks and pointy hats and filigreed Bibles. No. The set was in the austere Staunton measure, the chessmen delightfully solid and firmly moored on their felt (even the pawns were as heavy as Derringers), and the board of such proportion that you did indeed feel like a warrior prince on a hilltop, dispatching your riders with their scrolled messages, and pointing through the morning mist, telescope raised. And not a drop of blood being shed. That's how the valley had looked two minutes ago: Field of the Cloth of Gold. Now it resembled some sanguinary disgrace from a disease-rich era, all pressed men, all rabble, the drunken cripples reeling, the lopped tramps twitching and retching in the ditch. Richard was now staring at what any reasonable player would recognize as a lost position. But he would not lose. He had never lost to Gwyn. It used to be that Richard was better at e e r thing: chess, snooker, tennis, but also art, love, even money. How casually Richard would pick up the check, sometimes, at Burger King. How thoroughly, and with how many spare magnitudes, did Gina outshine Gilda. How good Drea m Don't Mean

Anything had looked, in hard covers, when placed beside the weakly glowing wallet of Gwyn's crib-notes to The Maunciple' Tle . . .

They exchanged knights.

"So what did you do? I suppose you could have just chucked the whole thing out . . . The Los Angeles Times. What's the matter with you?"

In formulating this last question Richard had lightly stressed the personal pronoun. For Gwyn was doing something he did more and more often these days, something that brimmed Richard's neck with mumps of hatred. Gwyn was inspecting an object—in the present case, the black knight—as if he had never seen it before. With infant wonder in his widened eyes. Richard really couldn't sit there: opposite somebody pretending to be innocent. Maybe Gwyn had got hold of some novel, by a woman, about a poet, and thought that this was how dreamers and seekers were meant to behave. Another possible explanation was what Richard called the Maggot Theory. According to the Maggot Theory, Gwyn had a maggot in his brain, and every frown, every pout, every pose was directly attributable to the maggot's meanderings and its maulings and above all its meals. Watching Gwyn now, Richard felt the Maggot Theory gaining ground.

"It's a chessman," said Richard. "It's a knight. It's black. It's made of wood. It looks like a horse."

"No," said Gwyn dreamily, placing the piece with his other captures, "I found the thing in the end."

"Found what?"

Gwyn looked up. "The thing about me. The thing that was meant to interest me in the L.A. Times."

Richard ducked back to the board.

"My glance just fell on it. Luckily. Look at it. I could have been slaving through that thing all bloody week."

"Now this calls for some serious thought," said Richard in a higher and frailer register. "Around from the king side," he said. Behind him a door opened. "And see what we can find," he continued, "on the queen side."

Demi was entering, or crossing: the library lay between the two drawing rooms. She moved past them with reverent stealth, actually tiptoeing for the central few strides, with knees naively raised. Big, blond, unsatirical, but not quite the other thing either (unburnished, unrefined), Demi performed her tiptoe without ease and without talent. Like the not-so-natural parent, playing a children's game. Richard thought of the flash accountant he had unnecessarily and very temporarily hired, after the American sale of Af rethought: how, during the appointment at his place, he had made a show of jovially chasing his daughter from the room, with

jangle of keys and coins, with knees raised, past the modern first editions and the texts of tax . . . Demi paused at the far door.

"Brrr," she said.

"Hi Demi."

"It's not very warm in here."

Gwyn turned her way, his eyes bulging uxoriously. To Richard he looked like a clairvoyant who, as a matter of policy, was keen to demystify his profession.

"Why not put a cardy on, love?"

"Brrr," said Demi.

Richard got his head down and, with infinite grief, started working to a different plan.

PART *TWO*

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Books, Arts, Entertainment, The Week in Review, Real Estate, Sports. It seemed that he knew the whole thing backwards anyway. Poise, Style, Flair. He read everything from the cookery column to the crossword clues. Could it be that there was a special way of preparing egg and chips in the mode of Gwyn Barry? Was it possible to contrive a crossword clue out of that vilely vowelless forename, that curt and surly surname (NY wry grab—wait—agitated by British novelist? 4,5)? When Richard walked the streets with all his fingertips on his forehead he was saying to himself, am I one? am I two? am I worse? am I better? At night, as he prepared to enter the forests of sleep and temptation, things looked like two things: the ironing board was a deck chair and the mirror was a standing pool. He was being inf r ed - t e information came at night, to inhume him. Jump-leads of agony: for all this time, jump-leads of agony went from Holland Park to Calchalk Street. What was it? A a tube, an electric whip with scorpion sting. And now it seemed that the Grove itself was a league-long knout or sjambok, made of London, thoughtlessly wielded by Gwyn Barry and danced to, howling and sweating, by Richard Tull.

Thoughtlessly? It did of course occur to Richard, as he sat in his study scanning the college hockey results or the wheat futures, as he abandoned Barcaloungers, say, and started rereading the weather forecast, that he had been rumbled and finessed—that the Los Angeles Times was guilelessly and even winsomely Gwyn-free. But he was basically convinced that Gwyn wouldn't need to pull a flanker on him. The world would do it. Late in the evening of the tenth day he found it. Page eleven, column three: the personals page, in the Classified Section, under "Miscellaneous." It went like this:

> "Stephanie." Pet Adoptions. Rottweiler 1 yr. Gentle girl. Plus free hamster given with purchase of cage.
> Summertown. Wanted. First ed. of novel by Gwyn Barry.
> Swap-Meet Garage Yard Sale. All welc.

He waved to the waitress. No, not another Zombie, thank you; he would try a Tarantula. The young man sitting opposite with his scalene face and his shoulders hunched over his book in the posture of a professional bicyclist—the young man took the opportunity to order a club soda. The waitress lingered, making notes.

The waitresses were less young and pretty than they used to be; kivts then the Canal Creperie was less young and pretty than it used to be—was now, in fact, the resort of insomniac boozers prepared to pay for,

Dreams Don't Mean Anything. "Aoa

and depthlessness. Richard's lower teeth were like a rank of men in macks on a stadium terrace, tugged into this or that position by the groans of the crowd.

"Sorry?"

"Do you want me to sign that for you?" He leaned across and tapped the back cover. He removed his dark glasses, but not for long. He smiled gauntly.

The young man did the thing of dividing his stare between photo and face until he said, "Who would have oddsed it? Small world. Steve Cousins."

Richard took the hand that was flexed out to him like a shot card. He felt the rare and uneasy luxury of letting his own name go unannounced. Also he asked himself, with what seemed to be abnormal pertinence, whether he was about to get beaten up. His nuts-and-violence radar used to be good, when he was soberer, and less nuts himself.

Steve said, "I think I saw you one time down the Warlock."

"The Warlock: sure. Are you a player?"

"Not tennis. Not tennis. I always thought tennis was an effeminate game. No offense meant."

"None taken," said Richard sincerely. His impulse now was to flip his wallet onto the table and produce the photographs of his two boys.

"Squash is my game. Squash. But I don't play down there. I'm not even a Squash Member. I'm a Social Member."

Everybody knew about the Social Members of the Warlock. They didn't go down there for the tennis or the squash or the bowls. They went down there because they liked it.

"Well, I'm injured," said Richard. "Tennis elbow." This was true. Lift a racket? He could hardly lift a cigarette.

His interlocutor nodded: such was life. He was still holding the (closed) book out in front of him; it seemed inevitable, now, that he would have to say something about it. The anxiety this gave rise to led Steve Cousins to consider a rather serious change of plan: from plan A to plan i or plan V, plan O, plan X. To activate plan X he even reached into his pocket for the eyedrop bottle. This was plan X: lace his drink with lysergic acid and then, the minute he started looking nauseous or talking stupid about the funny lights, take him outside, for some air, down the walkway near the water, and kick his teeth out one by one. Scozz paused. Plan A regained its substance. It was like the glow that came up on a stage set. With a soft gulp of effort he said,

"I'm an autodidact."

Yes, listen, thought Richard: he can even say autodi d c . . . He waved

Dream Don't Mean Anything

Forethought

blood-soaked bandages all over his mouth) Kirk told Scozz that Lee was going to have Beef put down. Now Kirk wanted Scozz to go over and do Lee! Scozzy said, "Don't talk fucking stupid." Yet Kirk swore that Beef's death would not pass unavenged . . . If literary courtesy compelled him to have the author sign his own book, then Scozzy had an answer ready. *Dream Don't Mean Anything* was in very good condition: as new. The wonky-hipped old dears, the wraiths in towel robes awaiting the results of tests, the stoical criminals on the mend from line-of-work spankings and stripings—none of them, apparently had sought solace or diversion in the pages of *Dream Don't Mean Anything* . . .

"At the Warlock. You play with the other writer."

"Gwyn."

"Gwyn Barry. Best-seller."

"That's him."

"Numero uno. Beyond meteoric. Quite an achievement."

"Yes, it is. Quite an achievement. When what you write is *unadulterated shit.*"

"Total crock."

"The purest trex."

"Complete crap."

Richard looked at him. The eyes lit but narrowed. The bent slot of the mouth. A violent maniac who hated Gwyn's stuff. Why weren't there any more where he came from?

"With the junkie wife."

"Demi? Demeter?"

"Who has a distinct liking for—for our colored brethren."

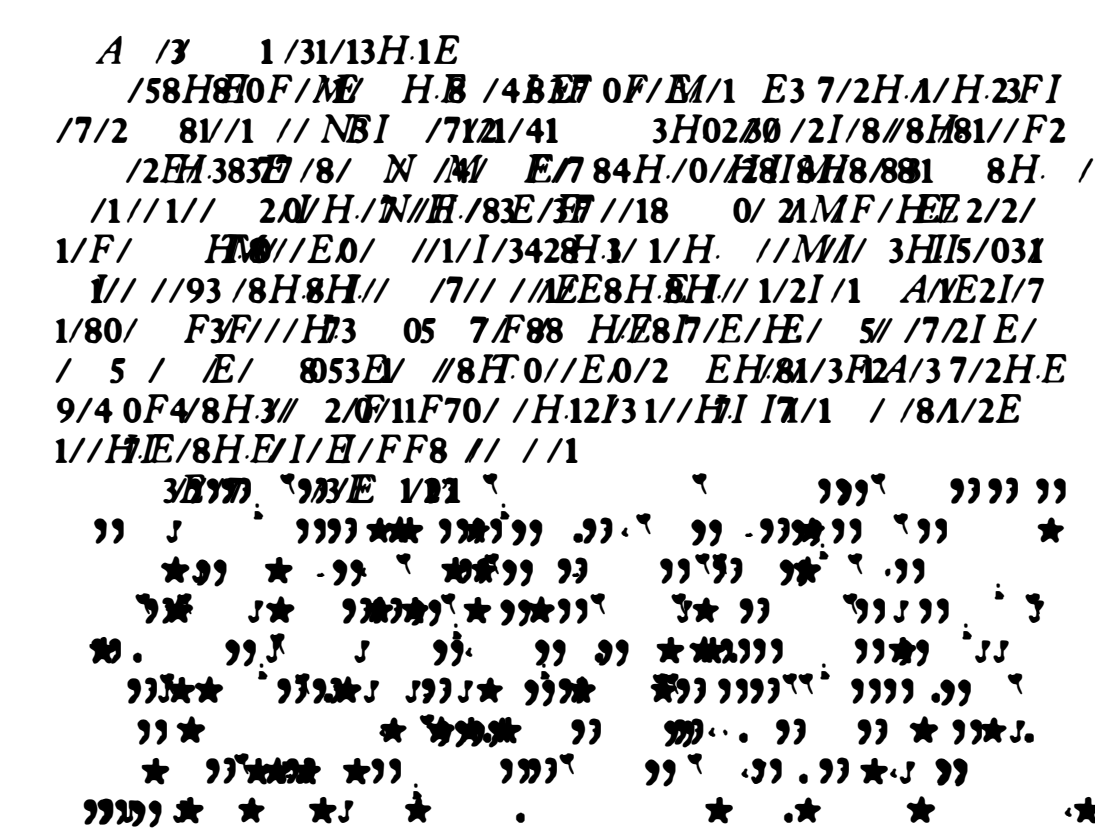
"Oh come on."

"Do you or do you not know how it goes? First off: she was a classic coke rat. In and out of those deluxe dryout joints. NA. All this. A big blond Lady who likes black stuff. You think that don't get around?"

"When was this? Why *didn't* it get around?"

"See, it's *face.* It's *face.* You're lying on a floor somewhere, right? All blissed out. The reason you're feeling so good is that Lance or whoever has just come in with the white bag and helped you pump it up your nose. And there's this great big solemn schwartzer staring down at you and holding out his hand the way they do." He held out his hand the way they do, with palm slowly upturned. "Everyone else, okay, they're half out of it, but not Lance, who touches nothing stronger than Lilt. You telling me she's going to say no to Lance? 'No thanks, mate'? With the political pressure on her? Half them pushers are only in it for the flip."

"The what?"



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"Half brother."

"Same dad," said Richard, who unfortunately chose this moment to look at his watch. If he had gone on looking across the table he would have known for sure that the young man didn't have a half brother. Or a mum. Or a dad.

"She said she'd never seen a newlywed cry so much."

"And why would that be?"

"She wants kids: Catholic. And he won't have them."

Richard sipped his Rattlesnake with some wariness. He was wondering how good at walking he was going to turn out to be, when the time came. There was still a pretty good guy in here, he reckoned. But his voice was slipping from baritone to bass; and he knew the signs. He said,

"What do you do?"

"You've forgotten my name, haven't you? You've forgotten it."

"Yes. Come to think of it. I've completely forgotten it."

Again the hand was flexed out towards him, tense, vertical—the shot card.

"Steve Cousins. What do I do? Well I could say 'this and that.' t some do. 'Me? Ah you know. This and that.' You know. 'Bit of this. Bit of that.' Thing is I'm in a more fluid thing now. I don't need to interact now, financially. Semiretired if you like. My main activities now are what you'd call recreational."

For a moment they studied each other: quid pro quo. To Richard (who was "pixelated," and thoroughly, in the old sense), Steve looked like a white-and-gray chessboard: like a forensic suspect on TV, his face smeared into squares. To Steve (who was Sunday-best sober, as always), Richard looked like an artistic two-dimensionalization of himself, hollow, wavery, approximate and rendered with minimum talent: the work of a court portraitist. Richard was a witness. Richard was a character witness.

"So?" said Richard. He sipped and waited.

And Scozzy shrugged and said, "I fuck people up."

Richard turned in his seat. He felt that this called for another Rattlesnake.

The Lit le Magazine now lived in Soho, where it had only recently arrived and would not long remain. The Lit le Magazine had seen better days. The offices of The Lit le Magazine were little offices, and the rent was overdue.

The Lit le Magazine was born and raised in a five-story Georgian town house next to the Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields (1935–1961). Dusty decanters, hammocklike sofas, broad dining tables strewn with books and learned journals: here a handsome philanderer in canvas

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The Literary Magazine

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posed; and a sense of his own artistic worth. So he lit a cigarette and went ahead and called Gal Aplanalp.

"It's all going forward," she said. x; fact it's placed."

She was referring, of course, not to his novel but to his projected five thousand–word profile of Gwyn Barry, which had inspired broad and competitive interest. Gal named a sum of money which exactly corresponded to Richard's annual salary at The Li t le Magazine. After a silence he said,

"What about my book?"

"I know. I've cleared the weekend for it. I'm taking it home tonight. Gwyn says it's remarkable."

"Gwyn hasn't read it."

"Oh," said Gal Aplanalp.

Having said good-bye and hung up, Richard managed to apply himself to some constructive work. Ringing round various publishers, he identified and called in three books for review. One was by Lucy Cabretti. One was by Elsa Oughton. One was by Professor Stanwyck Mills. These authors, we might remember, were the judges of the Profundity Requital. Ringing round various contributors, Richard then entrained three favorable notices. We must trust him on this. He had his reasons. Richard was about to get up and go and find her when Anstice slowly put her head round the door. Her face blinked at him.

"Is there anything I should be worrying about, Anstice?"

"Oh no. I expect we shall soldier through."

"Cosmo seems much improved. So does Hugo."

"You know, I really respect Hugo for the way he's getting to grips with it. No, it's Theo."

"Oh?"

By a long-established anomaly, the last page of the books (it was the batched fiction review) was put to bed on the same day as the arts. Now you expected no trouble whatever on the batched fiction review. It was The Li t le Magazine's plum job, often squabbled and feebly brawled over: he who wrote the batched fiction review ended up with perhaps a dozen new hardbacks to sell to the man in Chancery Lane. Richard wanted to write the batched fiction review. Even the editor wanted to write it.

Anstice said, "He wants to know if he can fax it in."

"He hasn't got a fax. *We* haven't got a fax."

"That's what I told him."

"Well tell him to get out of bed and get dressed and get on the bus and bring it in. Like he always does."

"He sounded a bit . . ."

"No doubt he did." Richard told her that if she could bear it—and if indeed Theo had written it—she should simply phone him up and have him slur it in. Before she went he said, "How are you?"

"Pretty well, really. For a ruined woman. One roughly used and then cast aside. R. C. Squires was in here."

"How horrible. Is he coming back?"

"I don't know. Will I be seeing you later?"

"Of course, Anstice," he said.

She left. She left slowly, her presence reluctantly receding from him. When it was there no longer his head dropped suddenly like a weight. It hung, at right angles to the sheen of his paisley waistcoat. Having dropped about forty-five degrees . . . Which is a lot, on some scales, by some reckonings. For example, Barnard's Star, as it is called, crosses 10.3 seconds of arc per year. This is a quarter of the Jupiter pinpoint—about a sixth of a degree: per year. Yet no other heavenly body shows so great a proper motion. This is why it is called the Runaway Star . . . And just by dropping his head like that Richard was changing his temporal relationship with the quasars by thousands and thousands of years. He really was. Because the quasars are so far away and getting farther away so fast. This is to put Richard's difficulties in context. The context of the universe.

Eleven hours later he was emplaced with Anstice in the Book and Bible. The paper had been put to bed. To put to bed was what you did with children—whereas grownups took each other there.

Crooned at and lullabied, given snacks and glasses of water, its fears assuaged, The Litle Magazine had been put to bed. Bruno, the theater critic, had finished his major piece on The Three Sisters. Unfortunately it proved to be only thirty words long. The opera critic, Hugo, had failed to write anything at all, despite spending the afternoon in a sinkful of iced water and despite engaging, with Anstice, in a program of deep-breathing exercises which reminded Richard of the classes he had attended with Gina: the adults sitting around on the floor and gazing up at teacher like the children they would shortly bear. Otto, the radio critic, finished his piece and then tore it up and threw it out the window. Several heads slewed round, at first in dismay and then in hard suspicion, when Inigo, the film critic, said through his tears that he was betraying his poetry by writing for money. You mean someone around here was getting money? Towards dusk it looked for a while as though Richard and Anstice would be faced with another Black Friday. This was the occasion on which all seven arts writers—grouped about the place in varying postures of weary contemplation—had produced not a syllable between

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recessed, his upper lip exaggeratedly cupid's bow, the shape of a gull coming right at you. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" shouted one of his victims, according to witnesses: a little boy, stabbed to death by an adult stranger in the neighborhood playground. The little boy's brother was also stabbed to death. He didn't say anything. There was also a third and much younger child whom the murderer kept for several days, beforehand.

Gina said, "Look at the face on that horrible queer."

Marius entered the kitchen and, without ceremony, presented his parents with the contention that he "looked like shit" in his school photograph. The school photograph was produced and exhibited. Marius didn't look like shit.

"You don't look like shit," said Richard authoritatively. He felt he knew all there was to know about looking like shit. "You look good."

"I think that's so awful," said Gina, "the little boy saying 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' like that."

The young swear more now, and the old swear more now. This is perhaps the only area in which your parents can shock you as much as your children. The middle-aged swear more too, of course, in reflexive protest against their failing powers.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" cried the little boy to the adult stranger in the neighborhood playground. The little boy's brother was also stabbed to death. He didn't shout, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He was older and maybe he knew something that his little brother didn't know.

Among its many recent demotions, motive has lost its place in the old law enforcement triumvirate: means, motive, opportunity. Means, motive, opportunity has been replaced by witnesses, confession, physical evidence. A contemporary investigator will tell you that he hardly ever thinks about motive. It's no help. He's sorry, but it's no help. Fuck the why, he'll say. Look at the how, which will give you the who. But fuck the why.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" cried the little boy. He thought he had offended and angered his murderer in some way, without meaning to. He thought that that was the why. The little boy was searching for motivation, in the contemporary playground. Don't look. You won't find it, because it's gone. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

A square of city rather than a city square, it branched out like an inbred slum family whose common name was Wroxhall. Wroxhall Road, then Wroxhall Street. Wroxhall Terrace, then Wroxhall Gardens. Then Court, Lane, Close, Place, Row, Way. Drive, then Park, then Walk. Richard locked the Maestro, whose days were numbered, and turned to

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pale wire, the brutalist hairdos of the lopped trees. Poverty said the same thing, century after century, but in different kinds of sentences. The sentences spoken by what confronted him here would be short sentences, rich in nothing but solecism and profanity. Now how did this tie in with the mangled syllogism, arrived at ten hours earlier over a cup of tea and a stupefied cigarette, following the usual failure with Gina. Going something like:

A. Gwyn's trex was loved by the world; his trex was universal.
B. The world loved trex; the world was trex.
C. Better use the world, in that case; better have Gwyn picked on by something his own size . . .

No need for Richard to knock himself out, humping the Los Angeles Times all over town. Or seeking the hospitality of the pages of The Li t le Magazine for that gory "middle" he was forever rehearsing in his mind. Literature couldn't do it. The world could fucking do it . . . t Richard climbed the steps, the supposedly superseded notion of paying money to get Gwyn beaten up returned to him with all the freshness of discovery.

As promised, the front door was unlatched ("I guarantee it," Darko had said). Steadying himself in the hall Richard heard the sound of a sander or a plane-saw: a plane-saw whining for its plane-saw mummy. It was the noise of dental pain: it was the noise of pain. The weak link i you, Steve Cousins had said, in the Canal Creperie. If we do this, he had said, the weak link is you. If someone leaned on you—you'd break. People don't know pain and fear, he had said. I know pain and fear. Pain and fear are my friends. I'm watertight. The weak link is you . . . Richard had always thought that he knew pain and fear; but he didn't—not yet. Pain and fear were waiting for him, as they waited for everyone. A whole hospice of pain and fear, patiently waiting.

He knocked on the first inner door he came to. Darko opened it. h Transylvanian confrontation, just for a second: Darko's eyes were redder than his red hair, redder than the Maestro. He looked Richard up and down, and said, as if identifying him by name, "Charisma bypass." Very soon they were standing in a room roughly the size of a tennis court and filled with furniture that might have come from anywhere or even everywhere: from the SCRs of provincial sociology departments, from business hotels, from schoolrooms, from barracks.

Turning, Richard said boldly, "Where are you from, Darko? Originally."

"From the place I still call Yugoslavia."

Darko was standing in the middle of the room's kitchen district and staring down at some kind of foodstuff splayed on a plate. Now he looked up, and smiled. Long upper lip with a feathery mustache on it; long upper gum, also gingery in hue.

"Are you Serb or Croat? Out of interest."

"I don't accept that distinction."

"Yes. Well. There isn't any ethnic distinction, is there. Just religion. Nothing visible." On the mantelpiece Richard thought he saw a devotional knickknack or icon, lit from within by a bulb the shape of a closed tulip; it was the Virgin Mary (he sensed), but travestied, with joke breasts outthrust like the figure of a redoubtable maiden on a ship's prow. "Isn't there some big deal about the sequence of making the sign of the cross? i the war, in the world war, Croat soldiers rounded up children and got them to make the sign of the cross. To see which way they did it. To see if they lived or died."

This was obviously news to Darko: fresh information. Richard tried to relax himself with the following thought: that nowadays, in a sense, you could know more about a stranger than the stranger knew about himself. Recently he had involved himself in an argument on his doorstep with a proselytizing Mormon (soon to be sent on his way with a taunt) who had never heard of Moroni: Moroni, the nineteenth-century American angel, the Messiah of the wild-goose chase in whose name the bearded ranter trudged from house to house. Big clue, that: Moroni. Moron with an *i* on the end of it. Moronic without the c.

Darko said, "I believe that everyone is a human being."

"I buy that too. Belladonna, I take it, is a human being. I mean I assume she exists. Where is she?"

"Getting dressed. Getting undressed. What's the diff? Now what do I do with this cholesterol bomb?"

He gestured at the dish and what it contained. The dish glowed back up at him like the palette of a busy artist: some modern primitive who worked in pastels.

"Bung it in the fucking MW," Darko decided.

MW equaled microwave. That was good. The word had fewer syllables than its abbreviation. Especially good, especially self-defeating, because the microwave was a device intended to cheat time. Anyway Darko had already heated it, and was already eating it—his mango pizza or pomegranate rissole—with both hands . . . On a video he'd hired and admired, Richard remembered the motorist hero referring to his FWD, or four-wheel drive. One might add that there are certain frolicsome cosmologists who refer to "the WYSIWYG universe," or "What You See Is What You

Get." To be fair, this isn't an abbreviation but an acronym. They don't actually stand there and say Double-U-Why-Ess-Eye-Double-U-Why-Gee. They stand there and say Wsiwig. Those assholes. Whom we ask to do the job of wondering how we're here. The WYSIWYG universe is the one in which d rk *matter*, the overarching shadow comprising perhaps 97 percent of universal mass, remains unexotic, the usual proton-neutron-electron arrangement, just planets, possibly, bigger than Jupiter but not big enough to shine, "massive compact halo objects," known (what is it with these guys?) as MACHOS. What is it with these guys? The "free lunch" universe. The "designer" universe. The "charisma bypass" universe? Sending their minds back eighteen billion years, they reach for catchphrases that were getting old eighteen months ago.

"Will Belladonna be joining us? And tell me more," said Richard, making sure there was plenty of amusement in his tone, "about her thing with Gwyn Barry."

Darko held up a finger while he finished a demanding mouthful, one that involved much tongue work on all four sets of molars. At last he said, "Who?"

"Belladonna."

"You mean Diva. She's called Diva now. Now I don't know Diva mega-well."

"Is that right."

"With men, everywhere you look there's Divagate."

No, not divagate: Divagate. Like Watergate, etcetera.

.h lot going on," Richard suggested. "More than meets the eye."

"She gives good girlrock, I reckon. Yep."

Richard went on standing there.

"Oh yeh," said Darko with resignation. "Diva's wild for the wild thing."

"Have you known her mega-long? Where is she, for instance?"

Darko excused himself and left the room through a door beyond the kitchen. When he came back he looked at Richard suddenly and said, "Who are you?"

"Richard. Who are you?"

"Ranko."

"You mean Darko."

"Darko is my twin brother. He's Croat. I'm Serb. We look the same but we've got nothing in common."

"Well you both eat pizza. You've still got a bit of it hanging from your mustache."

The man stood there neutrally, continuing to clean his teeth with his tongue. "She's getting up," he said. "Me I'm off out."

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"Yeah?"

"You're so young. S don't know. You don't seem to be Gwyn's type."

"He's like . . . in love with me."

With a defiant shake or twitch of the head. On the word l ve.

"Is he now?" said Richard as he sat beside her. She was gazing down at her clasped hands: anchorectic Belladonna. He found himself entertaining the reckless hope that she was already pregnant. "And how do you feel about that?"

"Pleased, obviously. Proud. I know he's married or whatever."

"Are you . . .? S mean has this been going on long?"

She smiled secretively. "You know what my thing is? Read my lips." My thing, she said silently, is my mouth.

"Your mouth."

"That's what they call me: The Gob. The Mush. Ever since S was little S had this mouth." My thing is my mouth. I'm famo u f r my mouth.

"You're still little," said Richard.

Here, he thought, we had the second punk principle. Everyone their own artist. Everyone their own legend. That guy's thing is to have a kilo of old newspapers glued to his hair, that girl's to wear a clothespeg through her cheek. Belladonna's thing was her mouth. Richard felt the contradiction (or would later feel it: he was busy now), because the talent was still no-talent, still idly particular, with no claim on the universal. It picked on a contradiction of Richard's. He wouldn't mind having no genius, if no one else had any? No, not true. He did want people to have it, genius; he wanted it to be out there.

Come and l ok, Belladonna mouthed. Look cose l. She leaned back and adjusted the head of the angle-poise lamp, as if she was her own dentist. Richard—a consultant, a second opinion—bent himself nearer. I've n e e had a f l ng, he saw her say, her lower lip answering, as in a dance, to the movement of the tongue. Her teeth were indeed pitilessly perfect. Look how long my tongue is . . . Belladonna's mouth: Richard almost had his nose in it. And he knew he would never feel the same way about women's mouths again, how internal they were, how red and pink and white and wet. Yes, that was right: like a lateral and platonically perfect pubis, containing thirty-two teeth. There was no confusion here. He knew where the teeth were and where they weren't. Before he sat back he let her breath register on him and he found its taste was sweet, but sweet like a medicine, not like a fruit.

"There are tricks S can do with it."

Her tongue appeared and arched up and settled its straining sting on the tip of her nose. Then it withdrew, and the mouth smiled, and said, "Or

this." Now the lips distended and scrolled away from one another. They said, "Blackface." The teeth and gums within looked distant, like a mouth within a mouth. Reconstituted, the mouth mouthed, Take my hand.

He obeyed her. It was a normal hand, too, but he could hardly connect it with Belladonna, who was, as she said, as her mouth said, just a mouth.

Which said "Watch" as the free hand approached it and then disappeared into it, wrist-deep.

Richard turned away, in search of his identity. All he could find was some very worn old stuff. "You want to be careful," he said, "who you show that to."

"I am." Her whole face was looking at him with indulgent reproach. *I am.*

When she switched off the lamp Richard realized that the room had been smoothly and silently invaded by the adulterous light of dusk; the light that lovers know, intimate and isolating and flatteringly amber. In this particular spasm of his spousal evolution, adultery was a red-light district, and the red just meant danger. He had been in wrong rooms before. He had been in wrong rooms before, but they tended to be better appointed than the one in which he now lurked. The circumambient red was the red of Darko's gums, closing on the f it ve r. r>year ago, with Anstice, he had shed his clothes in one of these wrong rooms. What saved him from technical adultery, on that occasion, was a mysterious inner strength, something mysterious even to himself (though he knew a whole lot more about it now): impotence . . . What starts to go, around now, he had decided, is not necessarily the hard-on but the sensation of the hard-on. And with the loss of that sensation (the hurting blood) goes the loss of the belief, the loss of the transcendence and, very soon afterwards (before you know it, in fact), the loss of the hard-on. Such as it was. In its stead, the little death, the little death of ruined powers, of dud magic. Anyway, sensation informed him that impotence would not save him now, if it came to it. Some other dynamic would be obliged to intercede. The most likely candidate, at present, was premature ejaculation. He thought: I'm here because I'm scared of dying. I didn't do it. Death did.

His life, his whole life, was approaching its third-act climax. There would be two acts to follow. The fourth act (conventionally a quiet act). And then the fifth. What genre did his life belong to? That was the question. It wasn't pastoral. It wasn't epic. In fact, it was comedy. Or anti-comedy, which is a certain kind of comedy, a more modern kind of comedy. Comedy used to be about young couples overcoming

difficulties and then getting married. Comedy wasn't about that now. Romance, which used to be about knights and wizards and enchantment, was now about young couples getting married—romance, supermarket romance. Comedy was about other things now.

"There's a test I do on boys," she said. Richard showing interest, she continued, "Just tell me. I'll go out of the room and then come back in again and do whatever you want."

"How do you mean?"

"It's simple. Just tell me and I'll do it."

"What kind of thing?"

"Whatever. Your favorite."

"My favorite what?"

"Don't be shy. You know: any little thing. Your favorite."

"Say I don't have a favorite."

"Everyone has a favorite. They're funny, these little things, sometimes. It tells you so much about someone."

"Yeah, but what kind of thing?"

"Anything!"

Abruptly the room reminded Richard of the classroom in the crammer he had attended years ago, on Gwyn's street. Mostly it was the dimensions, he supposed, and the room's intransigently undomestic feel. Perhaps, too, the sense he had then, at eighteen, that he was being graded here for the rest of his life; that information about himself, welcome or unwelcome, was on its way, and getting nearer.

"Do you like doing this test on boys?"

"Yeah I really want to know it about people. What their favorite is."

"Because . . ."

"It tells you so much. About them."

"How many times have you uh, run this test on boys?"

She shrugged expressively—but not enlighteningly. Two or three times? Two or three times a day? Richard thought that there probably wasn't much point in trying to read her manner. Not much point in assigning adverbs to it, and so on (proudly, indignantly, flusteredly). As was the case with Steve Cousins, Belladonna had her feelings and reactions and affectations, but they played to a different and newer rhythm whose beat he didn't know.

"Give me an example. What was Darko's favorite?"

"Darko," said Belladonna (proudly, indignantly, flusteredly).

". . . Okay. What's the most usual favorite? What do they usually want you to do?"

"Well, u all . . ." She paused—fondly, you might say. Her eyes

opened wide, in all innocence. "*Usually* they ask me to go out of the room," she said, "and then come back in nude, and then do a little dance. And then like suck their cocks."

The room gained another magnitude of dark. Who else but lovers—and solitary depressives—would sit in light like this and make no move for the switch?

"I always think it's the trick I show them with my hand. That makes them choose that. So go on. What's your favorite?"

But Richard asked, "What was Gwyn's favorite?"

"Gwyn." And here the adverbs would say thoughtfully, wistfully, tenderly. She turned to him, her face still lowered in shadow. Her clothes, as you might expect, emphasized what she liked most about herself and her body, what she was best pleased with, not a body part (in her case) but a certain rotational quality in the waist and hips. She squirmed and smiled and said, "You know I've never actually 'met' Gwyn Barry."

Richard stood up. He was leaving. He was pretty sure he was leaving. "So you don't know him," he said, "mega-well."

"He loves me."

"You mean you think he loves you."

"It's the way he like looks at me."

"When does he look at you?"

"When he's on TV."

"Do a lot of people on TV look at you?"

"No. Only Gwyn," said Belladonna, staring straight ahead, as if conducting a conversation with Richard's trousers. Then she tipped her head back. "You think I'm all mouth, don't you," she said, and let it half-smile and pout and quiver. "I'm not. I'm not. What's your favorite? I want to know."

"Why?"

"So we can make Gwyn jealous."

And Richard was gone.

Gal Aplanalp didn't call.

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And the good boy and the bad boy went into the forest.

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struck him as essentially perverse. When you thought of all the other occasions which cried out for hard-ons that never came. And here you not only didn't need one. You didn't even want one.

So they somehow got through good (qood, yood, goob), and did and again, and the again, and bad (dad, dab, bab), and toiled their way (bo was all right, for some reason) past went and eventually into, and staggered towards the penultimate the. Marco stared at the the word for perhaps a minute and a half. At that point Richard got out from underneath him. That was it: you could forget fres. Forests . . . forests, which in Dante and Spenser and Virgil and Milton symbolize the temptations of life. Good boy and bad boy go there. Enchanted glades or drear woods, places of complication or places where complication falls away—but places where you wil be tesed. Richard wondered whether Gwyn, in the course of his experiments in childishness and childish amazement, ever read like Marco read: one letter every twenty seconds. How had Gwyn developed this habit? Perhaps it came on him automatically: say at maggot mealtimes. Or perhaps he just thought it was good for business. He did it for interviewers, who obediently and admiringly described the phenomenon. Gwyn falling silent midsentence and picking up an orange from the bowl and staring at it. Gwyn pausing in the street as he leaves the restaurant, transfixed by a toyshop window. And you especiall can't do that any more, because the orange is designed by a spook in a labcoat, and the toyshop is no shrine of wonder but a synchronized thrash of targeters and marketers . . . Gwyn, incensingly, had gone off, still in one piece, on a ten-day promotional tour of Ital, where, he informed Richard, a relaunched Amelior was "on fire." The only real progress Richard could claim to have made was that he had successfully commissioned, received, subbed, and duly shepherded into print a favorable review of Double Dating by the Washington-based feminist critic Lucy Cabretti in The Little Magazine.

Marco slipped off his lap. and Richard tossed the kiddie book over his shoulder. For a moment his eye fell on the latest biography they'd sent at him: it was the size of a Harlem boombox. Richard rubbed his brow. The night before he had dreamed about some clubhouse in the Arctic, where women were eaten as if in a cafeteria, and where old Nazis hobnobbed with drugged monsters . . .

Heavily and dutifully, Richard moved up the stairs, to shower and dress—to put clothes on, to stand bent in the little cubicle while water fell. One glance in the mirror here, upon rising—the bruised scars beneath his eyes, his hair standing on end in terror—had caused him to scrap, or at least shelve, his immediate plan: seducing a lightly sun-kissed

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dystrophy or Ebola or Lassa Fever or rat-borne hantavirus or toxic-shock syndrome or antibiotic-resistant staphylococcus. Or gangrene or leprosy. Nowadays he was sure he had them all.

That morning there had been some idle prattle between Mr. and Mrs. Tull—would they never learn?—about the possibility of Marco taking a day off home and paying a visit to that fabled location, school. After all his temperature was barely into the low hundreds; he had woken just twice during the night, and then for no more than an hour each time. Only one of his ears was aching. Only one of his eyes was actually gummed shut with conjunctivitis (the other wasn't nearly so bad and even had the odd patch of white in it). At around eight-thirty, though, in an interval between coughing fits, Marco succeeded in throwing up his breakfast and could be heard crying for help from the bathroom as Gina went off with Marius (perfectly yet insouciantly uniformed, with up-to-date homework pouch, junior tennis racket and football kit bag festooned with rosettes). Richard would have Marco until four-thirty. Then Lizzete came, when her own schoolday was done. They paid her extra if she played hooky, and money was tight.

He wondered about Marius. That morning the senior twin had approached him and said, "Daddy? You're taking too much quack." Marius often neglected to sound his *r*s. So he must have meant *crack*.

Feral: that's what the wild boy was. That was what Steve Cousins was. And Richard could defend *feral*: it had to put up with a lot of dismissive talk (which it didn't like—which it didn't like *one* bit) from those who claimed that it was just a fashionable synonym for wild or untamed. Ooh, it hated it when anybody said that. Because *feral* derived not only from *ferus* (wild) but also from *ferox* (fierce). Now, something wild need not be fierce, may even be gentle. And the lion can lie down with the lamb. The lion can and must lie down with the lamb.

People who look at dictionaries all day keep seeing words at the top of the page—words they don't like seeing. Syzygy, crapulent, posterity, smegma, toiletry, dystopia, dentrifrice, bastinado, *ferae naturae*.

Two old ladies who lived in Calchalk Street did strange things for money. Old ladies, who wore the ovine uniform of the good.

One of these old ladies was called Agnes Trounce. She didn't just look old: she looked middle class and reliable and comfortably off. She had that benignly pleading expression of the diplomatically elderly in a youthful culture. Normally you could meet an old lady on a dark night—with equanimity. But you wouldn't want to meet this old lady, any time, when she was doing her strange thing for money.

weighed three hundred pounds and provided sexual relief over the telephone. She was called Margaret Limb. Her voice was hoarse and weathered but also high-pitched and musical, even maidenly, what with all that weight pressing down on it. The siren song of Margaret Limb could lure leaden businessmen out of humid hotel rooms on dark nights. - endless narrative of fat, she lay on a sofa doing the concise crossword and talking dirty. On the other end of the line, men arched and shivered to her tune.

Which old lady would you rather meet, on a dark night?

Now here is something very sad to think about.

The sun will die prematurely, in the prime of life, cut down at the age of fifty-three! One can imagine a few phrases from the obituaries. After a long struggle. Its brilliant career. This tragic loss. The world will seem a duller . . .

Looking on the bright side, though (and Satan, when he visited it, found the sun "beyond all description bright"), we mean solar years here, not terrestrial years. A solar year is the time it takes for the sun to complete an orbit of the Milky Way. And this is a good long while. For example, one solar week ago, man came stumbling out of the African rainforests. Herbiverous, bipedal—erect but by no means sapient. Four solar months ago, dinosaurs ruled the earth. One solar minute ago, we enjoyed the Renaissance. Having recently celebrated its twenty-fifth birthday, the sun will be with us for many solar years to come.

But it won't make old bones. Predictably, somehow (don't we see this every day?), the great decline will be presaged by increasingly hypermanic activity (look out of the window, at the twanging joggers), by a frantic reassertion of once-infinite but now-vanishing powers. The doomed despot wants to leave nothing behind: its policy, then, is scorched Earth.

First will come the solar winds. It is not given to human beings to imagine the power of the solar winds. But we can make a start by trying to think of an ultimate hurricane consisting of heavy objects—things like trucks and houses and battleships.

During its life on the main sequence, the sun was never accused of being small or cold. Everyone knows that the sun is big and hot. Being big and hot is what it's always been so good at. Now, therefore, it gets even bigger and even hotter. It leaves the main sequence. The yellow dwarf becomes a red giant.

At this stage we give the sun about eighteen (solar) months—two years, at the most. In necrotic rage Chronos consumed its young. Now it

"The History of Increasing Humiliation,

lishers—about

MAMMAL

Marco took this in. After all it was, for him, a perfectly average conversation. His face framed itself to say something nice—something, perhaps, about not wanting Daddy to go anywhere; but he just ducked shyly. That's where I'll end up, he thought. After Gina goes, and after Anstice has wearied of me. Among the Siberia lepers will I dwell. He imagined he would cut quite a dash, there in the colony, and would be entitled and even expected to go around sneering at those less fortunate than himself, at least to start with, until he too succumbed.

Kirk was out of hospital and Steve went around to see him: as you do.

They sat together, watching a video, Steve in his mack, Kirk on the couch, with a blanket. His face still looking like a pizza: heavy on the pepperoni. Kirk: his lieutenant. Organized the muscle.

It was a normal video they sat staring at. Cops and robbers. Or FBI and serial murderers. Steve had watched so much pornography, and so little else, that he had some mental trouble, watching normal videos. Whenever you got a man and a woman alone in a room, or an elevator, or a police car—Steve couldn't understand why they didn't start ripping each other's clothes off. What was the matter with them? Steve's glazed eyes strayed. Up on the book nook, above the TV console, was Kirk's modest collection of erotica: megaboobs from the boondocks. Steve knew all about Kirk's visions of eros: 200 pounds of nude blonde—on a trampoline.

"This it?" said Steve, meaning Kirk's general condition and immediate career plans.

Kirk droopily waved a hand at him.

"Beef?" said Steve.

"Beef," said Kirk, dropping his quilted face—with its onion rings, its anchovies.

See? Still pining. Beef had been put down by Kirk's brother Lee—after its third attack on Lee's daughter. Next came Kirk's retaliatory attack on Lee. And Kirk's brief rehospitalization.

"Kirk mate. You ain't going anywhere, are you?" said Steve, getting to his feet. "Give my love to your mum."

No one had as yet written a novel called *Quacko.* And for good reason. This novel would have no beginning, no middle and no end—and no punctuation. This novel would be all over the fucking gaff.

There wasn't going to be a novel called *Quacko* and there wasn't going to be any drugs war—or *drogs* whah (rhymes with ma), as Terryterry called it. Drugs war? Get real. "Get real," Steve Cousins would sometimes murmur, when he saw women, in pornography, who hadn't had their breasts surgically enhanced. "Get real. Get a life," he would mur-

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ticularly the strains associated with *Untitled*, proved to be almost embarrassingly fruitful. Gina really bought that shit—or could sound as if she did. Best of all, unquestionably (no contest), was *the death of the novel*, not as a cause of general concern (Gina wouldn't mind if the novel died) but as it related to Richard personally. The End of Fiction, the foreclosure of Richard's art, the casting of his staff into the cold waters: because they couldn't afford it. That worked. Not for the first time, and not insincerely, Richard pitied life's straightmen, its civilians, its one-dimensioners, all non-artists everywhere, who couldn't use art as an excuse. Wiany event, all that was behind him now. He didn't need to make excuses anymore. Because he didn't go near her. And she didn't go near him.

So Richard was now where he imagined he very much wanted to be: on the sofa of the big front room near the corner of Wroxhall Parade, in illicit evening light. Not only that: Belladonna was at his side, and she was also, in a certain sense, already more than in the nude. When he went to bed with Anstice that time Richard somehow persuaded himself that he was doing it "for Gina"—for his marriage, for his rattled virility. And that turned out real good, didn't it? With Belladonna, the internal argument was considerably more challenging (and harder to follow). If Richard succeeded in sleeping with her, then many benefits would of course be passed on to Gina, who would reap them in the marital bed, at her sated leisure. Besides, it wasn't his fault—it was death's fault. Every sensitive man was allowed a midlife crisis: when you found out for sure that you were going to die, then you ought to have one. If you don't have a midlife crisis, then that ' a midlife crisis. Finally, Richard's presence in this room was just one more move in the great game of Gwyn's ruin. He was here for the information. He had it all worked out.

Belladonna was at his side. Neither of them had spoken for three or four minutes. Richard told himself that this shared silence, maintained over a period of three or four minutes (that deracinating eternity), was clear proof of how relaxed they must be. Her face was half-averted. Soft-skinned and luminous, she smoked, with concentration, with self-communing ardor.

"I've been thinking," said Richard, with a faint and fussy smile, "about my 'favorite.' "

That wasn't really true. Richard's favorite, by now, would have taken eight hours to summarize, let alone perform. He was glad the room was getting darker, because that meant he could look at her without unavoidable and intrinsic lechery. For Belladonna wore a printed body-stocking which bodied forth—the body: the naked female body. Unlike the nipples, which were pink and rubbery, the kind of nipples a plumber might

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chained playground some large and muffled figure creaked alone and pleasurelessly on the pendulum of the swing; it stopped, and then started again, in a slower but no less desperate rhythm . . . The night before Richard had dreamed that he was having an unhappy love affair with his own son Marius. "Let's not do it any more," Marius had said. And Richard had said, "Yes—let's not." And Marius had said, "Because Daddy, if you do, it means you're inadequant."

Inadequant. Ah, innit *sweet.*

Gal Aplanalp called.

She said at the outset that she had an unfortunate coincidence to report.

Richard sat there, waiting. He felt far from resilient. His right ear still throbbed from its recent hour with Anstice. And then Gwyn, newly returned, had phoned in a knuckle-whitening celebration of Italian warmth, generosity, erudition and discernment—and Italian willingness to buy a novel called *Amelior* in record numbers.

"Tell me about it," said Richard.

On Tuesday, Gal explained, her assistant, Cressida, had stayed at home to apply herself to *Untitled.* So Cressida didn't go to work on Tuesday. And Cressida didn't go to work on Wednesday either, or on Thursday. Why was this? Because halfway through Tuesday morning, and halfway through the anomalously brief first chapter of *Untitled,* Cressida had suffered an attack of diplopia or double vision—of sufficient severity for her GP to suspect a case of (you'll like this) "vascular embarrassment" or even, quite possibly, an organic lesion of the central nervous system. Cressida? Cressida was fine. On light duties, and taking plenty of rest.

"What I'm going to do now is fire off a copy to Toby Middlebrook at Quadrant. He has the right kind of taste and the right kind of list. Both Cressida and I—we agree that *Untitled* is obviously a challenging and highly ambitious novel."

"How far did she get? Cressida."

Gal always tried to be as straight as possible with her clients. She told him: page nine.

He said good-bye. He hung up. He cleared a space for his elbows and sat there for a while with his head in his hands.

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Disobedient daughters, not obeying their mother. The little girl was showing the littler one a stunt on the slide. Jump off the top and land on your bum halfway down. Hasn't got the confidence. In Steve's head: concentration-loss followed by subject-change. He stopped thinking about hurting Terry and started thinking about hurting Gwyn.

Of course, Gwyn had off-street parking. It was hard to do much to a man in the bay of his own house, with all its windows standing above you and looking on. Off-street parking: vital in certain circumstances to the longevity of the urban male. Not to mention the ulcer or cancer you don't get, spending two hours a day looking for somewhere to put the fucking car. Get him at the exit to the Westway Health and Fitness Center. Send Wesley or D. Gwyn comes round the corner—and D runs right through him. That would be fifteen stone of bro coming at you at fifteen miles an hour. You're going to go down. All that coming at you, through you: you're going to go down. Then, well: whatever.

He picked up his mobile and called Clasford. He said, "Clasford? Tonight, mate." And then he added, after a pause, "No. You're going to the cinema."

"Yeah?" said Clasford cautiously.

"Starring Audra Christenberry. A touching tale about a group of children sent to the country during the Blitz. You do him in the toilet."

And Clasford just said, "Jesus."

The girls went inside for their tea. Behind him somewhere a police siren started up like a homosexual comedian: Ouuuu. Steve gave one of his agonized yawns. He started the engine and engaged first gear. Just then a *nun* stepped in front of the car and, while Scozzy sat there sighing and waiting, paused to examine some stain or discoloration on her shiny white bib. She looked up at him. For a moment the two virgins stared at one another, with virgin ferocity.

"Piece of shit," said Scozzy as he drove away.

"Audra Christenberry's in it. You like her, don't you?"

"Why's she in it? I thought it was set in England."

"She's an actress," said Richard. "They can put on voices. What do you want, the usual pint?"

Gwyn said, "I'll have a campari and soda."

"No. A pint of bitter for you. That's what they drink in Wles, isn't it?"

"Go on then. When's it start?"

They went with the drinks to their wives. A gin-and-tonic for Gina. A mineral water for Demi. She said that alcohol disagreed nT her:

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Gwyn said, "Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?"

"Than what?"

"My lady . . ."

"Don't," said Demi.

"Ah, she's embarrassed! I love it when she blushes like that. Mmmm." He hummed it, thoughtfully. "Mmm. Let's *not* go to the pictures. Let's go home and make love. We go home. You go home. And make love."

Richard said, "It does you good—I already got the tickets—does you good every once in a while to come down from the palace and mingle with your people. As one of them. In disguise." This sounded like, and was, a routinely bitter reference to Gwyn's new outfit, which he had already itemized to his listeners: russety suede jacket (Milan), brown Borsalino (Florence), dove-gray brogues (Siena). "Get that down you. One more pint. Quick."

"I've hardly got going on this."

"Another half. Get it down you."

"I'll spend the whole film in the lav."

Yes. You might very well do that, thought Richard. As he helped Gina with her coat she whispered in his ear: "I *hate* him." And Richard frowned, and nodded and felt close to vindication . . .

During the first half hour in the dark, he found his mind very difficult to control. It didn't matter what the film was—who directed it, whether it was in Japanese or black and white. This had mattered earlier. The film needed to be the kind of film that Gwyn, ever obedient, if you remember, to the wanders and gambols of his maggot, was currently saying he liked. And it really was Gwyn's kind of thing: innocent, rural, questing. A sensitive historical piece about a group of intelligent and long-winded adolescents shifted out of London to Cumbria during the Blitz—it was almost a cinematic prequel to *Amelior.* Richard, if he had been watching it, would have found it excruciating. But he wasn't watching it. He wouldn't have been watching it even if it was the kind of film *he* liked: a billion-dollar bloodbath. He wasn't watching it. Seated between the two novelists, and without looking down ever, childishly, the women shared their popcorn.

Lone male figures seated in movie theaters have about them, Richard thought, a madman or mongoloid intensity of privacy. I mean what are they? Frowning cineasts? Tramps? Movie theaters were surely much too expensive, now, for tramps to come and stink up. Richard knew that when he was a tramp there would be a lot of things he needed a lot more than stinking up a movie theater. In a full house the identity of the audience would have undergone gravitational collapse, and become one

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ay Ary.A"M")'Uh*S"A*UR" "" *Richard,* "" ":*A*"." "" *a*" "" " "" "")"."Uh " Uh" ." "*lsw*" *us*""?—*d*""*SA*". —"*A:'A*".—." "".. ""*i*

towels on the walls, double striplights above) so symmetrical that intuition demanded that a mirror stood at its center. But there was no mirror: only two of everything, opposed to a counterpart. Richard squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. No mirror, so no reflection; and he was a vampire, momentarily, denied its natural simulacrum, and fearing death by running water. Palpably, the Coronet toilet was the scene of a very recent gastric catastrophe: but it was the scene of nothing else. He moved sideways and quickly bent to look under the saloon doors of the cubicles: no quivering flounce of brown corduroy, no tortured dove-gray brogues. Richard was disappointed and Richard was relieved. He moved toward the urinal and was bending forward and breathing in (searching for purchase on his zipper toggle) when a voice said, "Nice smell in here."

And Richard's mind, which was always looking for pain, had time to feel hurt at this, had time to take this personally, as a sarcastic reference to himself. To himself, and not to the incredible smell of shit everywhere. He turned.

"Wait," he said. "This isn't me."

I: just wandered out. Get some fresh air. I told Demi. Didn't you notice I was carrying my hat? Between you and I I went back to the Slug for a quiet pint."

"Between you and me. Not a quiet Campari and soda?"

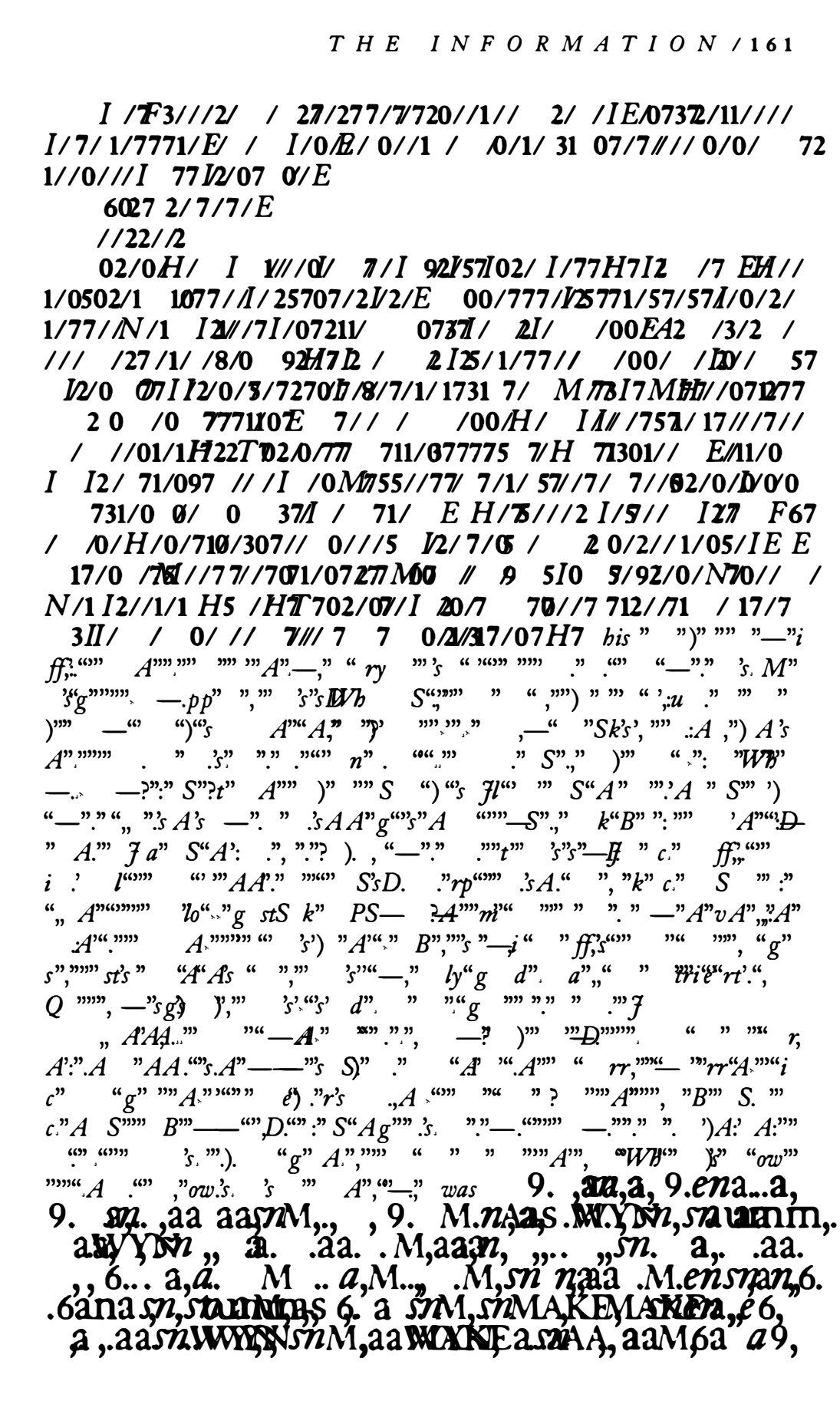
"I had a pint."

"What was the matter with the film?"

"It was getting on my wick, all that stuff about the barn. And the cows. The way they all kept on banging on."

"You're supposed to like all that. Fields. No sex. Civic-minded discussion. Nothing happening."

Outside the study window the clematis was tinged with yellow and gold—autumn, and Richard's cigarettes. He often smoked with his head on the block of the windowsill, facing skyward, to spare Marco's lungs. Out there, birds still fluttered and agitated, and they sang. The uncoilings, the slipping twists of sound. Say birds were just parrots and learned their songs from what they heard: those trills and twitters were imitations of mountain rivulets, of dew simpering downwards through the trees. Now the parrot had left its jungle and stood on a hook in a pub shouting "Bullshit!" Now the singing thrushes and sparrows outside the window sounded like machines. Cold out there. Now that he was forty, he feared the cold. Now he was forty, something animal in him feared the winter.



of water and book on the other. Demi was sleeping in the middle of the bed. Steve nodded to himself and went straight upstairs.

First he entered a pungent boxroom in whose far corner a hot sphere of black hair and brown skin lay spliced and swaddled in the linen. One word sufficed for her, the heavy dreamer he had sensed: Colombian. Next he entered a broad attic with high inward-leaning windows, decked out as a nursery or as a shrine to babyhood and infancy: crib, abacus, rocking horse. In a third room he found a young woman sleeping on a futon, naked, her face crushed into the pillow, a single white sheet bisecting her buttocks. Scornfully and cynically he loomed up on her. To him the scene looked like the aftermath of pornography. In his head he made a move for the remote, for the Rewind: have her turn over and reenact it all, backwards. Abruptly Scozzy's eyes jerked up to the ceiling and with a fierce roll he eased the tension in his neck.

Gwyn he found in a first-floor bedroom, opposite where Demeter now slept. He was familiar with the convention of the gentleman's sanctum—not from his reading but from his burgling. This would be where the gentleman normally slept, surrounded by cufflinks and hairbrushes: his launching pad for ceremonial visits to the marital couch. The room where Gwyn slept, in a twin bed, didn't feel like a dressing room. It felt like a guest room, gradually appropriated. He checked. Closets half full. Connecting bathroom scattered with male toiletries.

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nosing it, getting wind of it. And the other half (this was copromode) he thought it all made perfect sense: that if you looked like shit, and felt like shit and behaved like shit, then pretty soon you were going to smell like shit. For Richard knew he was going to hell: it was just a question of which circle. Christ, he knew that. Just as he knew that smoking was bad for his health. Even the packet said that it killed you . . . Having gone nuts in the nose, he wondered what to do about it, but not for long. His doctor had died five years ago and Richard hadn't looked for a new one. He couldn't see himself sitting in Casualty with the Friday-night crowd, where, anyway, to gain admission, you needed an axe in your head. Nor did he expect to pay a visit to some suburban superclinic the size of a dormitory town or a major airport where you had to get into lane at least a mile or two back up the road: Richard, in the Maestro, flinching as the signs sliced by him, looking for the one that said NUTS IN THE NOSE. In the kitchen he sidled experimentally up to Gina, waiting for her to pull back with a "Yuck" or a "Phwaw." And nothing happened. The point was that he didn't smell of shit. So who cared?

This Saturday morning, easing himself deeper into a bath almost Mediterranean in its oil-mantle and unguent prisms (and shit smells: would it soon aspire to the plastic 7-Up bottles, the belly-up jellyfish?), Richard thought briskly but proudly of all the bits of him that weren't nuts—or not nuts yet. People were nuts in the eyes and the ears. And Richard wasn't. People were nuts in the guts and the glands. Not Richard. The complacent roll call of organs that he was not yet nuts in might have continued—but then Marius knocked.

"Daddy. Quick."

"Jesus. Go upstairs."

"I'm desperate."

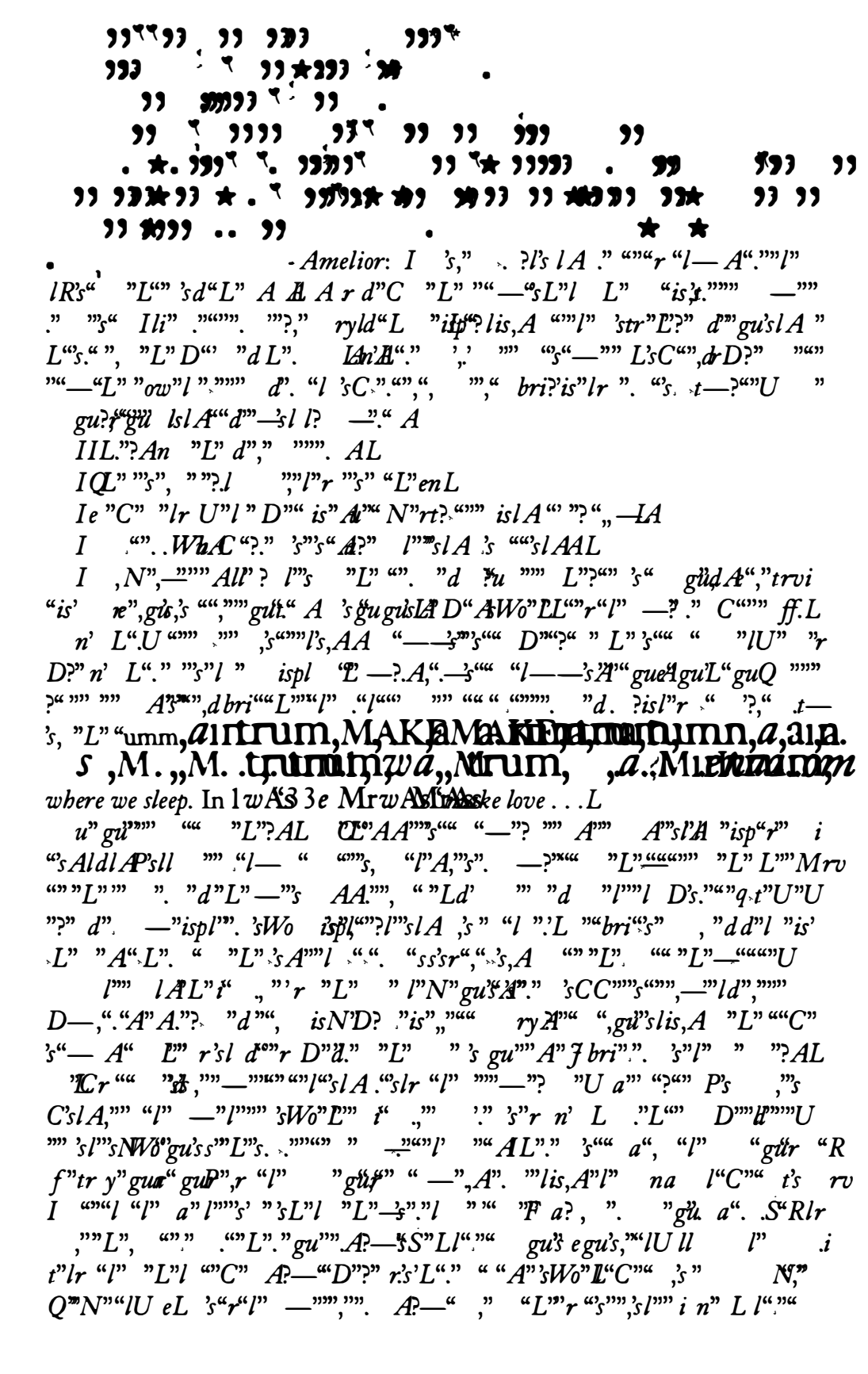
He rose, and turned the difficult doorknob. On the wall the mirror held him in its steam. After the usual pause Marius wandered inward. He lowered his track-suit bottoms and underpants a few inches but made no move for the bowl. As Richard dried himself his chest was suddenly remoistened by the thought that he was—and had long been—nuts in the Johnson. If going nuts was an internal treachery (all counter-suggestibility and finesse), then he had long been nuts in the Johnson. Oh yeah. And nuts in the brain.

Marius was now seated.

Just what I need, thought Richard: more shit.

The child's gaze was leveled at him. Marius said, declaratively, "You've got a big willy, Daddy."

"Well it's very nice of you to say so, Marius."



like Albert, Roger, and Bob. They turned, and greeted Gwyn, and Richard felt their humorous censure.

Pel said, "Quick. Here he is."

"Here he is," said Del. "Here's Cedric."

The Knowledge posed questions, offering multiple-choice answers (buttons A, B, and C), for modest cash prizes, depending on how far you traveled along learning's trail. To do well, to advance, you needed a good-sized crew round the Knowledge, all the smatterings you could get of history, geography, etymology, mythology, astronomy, chemistry, politics, popular music—and TV. Most crucially TV: TV down through the ages. It was in TV form that the other stuff was meant to be propagated anyway; and the newer knowledge machines, Richard had noticed, in the pubs he hung out in, actually *were* TVs: they fled the written, and embraced the audiovisual. The machine at the Warlock was trade-named Wise Money, and Richard, in his head, sometimes referred to it as the Profundity Requital, or the Aleph; but everyone else called it the Knowledge.

"Here, Cedric. What's . . . 'infra dig'?"

Richard squeezed up to the screen, which said:

Q. If a task was "infra dig," you would perform it

A. Quickly
B. Slowly
C. Unwillingly

"Complete non sequitur," brayed Richard, slapping the C. "You'd be just as likely to do it quickly or slowly. Beneath one's dignity. In f a *dignitat e* ."

"That's Cedric," said Bal.

Now the screen said:

Q: D. H. Lawrence was a well-known writer. What does "D. H." stand for?

tibDonald Henley
B. David Herbert
C. Darren Henry

"Darren's good," said Richard. "Or what about Duane? Duane Lawrence."

"Do it, Cedric," said Lol. "Go for it, Cedric."

Cedric? When it came to interpersonal humor, here at the Warlock,

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I3// 02/0/0IV/20 ///I/7 /// / 1IE/ H2/7/ 1/7/I/8/02
/11/2 57/73 92/32/I//0/H/2//2 1/7//2 /6IO /9/8/25I
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Del and Pel and the others would be so lulled by his mastery, by his Knowledge know-how, that the clock would tick along its ratchet and hum warningly, and Richard would guess, furiously, and smack the wrong button, and the quest, the trail of gold, would evaporate and a new one would form. Because of course the quest for knowledge never really ended. Like the universe, it was a saga of augmentative abasement. Who was said to be the last man to have read everything? Coleridge. Hazlitt. Gibbon. Coleridge: it was Coleridge. Two hundred years on, nobody had read a millionth of everything, and the fraction was getting smaller every day. And every new book held less and less of the whole.

"Let's go," said Gwyn. "We're on."

Richard was staring at the screen—at the resumed quest. What is coprolite? Rock. Oil deposit. Fossil dung. Turning to leave, he thoughtlessly smacked A (thoughtlessly, because the opening question of any quest allowed two attempts, as was meet, as was only right). Then with impatience he smacked B. Also wrong. "Shit," he said.

"Fossil dung!" said Pel, with humorous authority, as the quest dissolved.

"Yeah, of course. Kopros: shit. You know, like coprophile."

"Most untypical," said Gwyn.

Richard looked at him.

"I thought you knew everything about shit."

The guys laughed, uncertainly. TV meant that everything Gwyn said was revised upwards in terms of sparkle and pertinence; but shit, the reality, the stuff itself—this was not happy ground.

"Homer nods," said Bal. "Cedric nods. 'Anosmia' nods."

Anosmia: loss of sense of smell. Although Richard had a great memory, he didn't remember that "anosmia" had once featured on the Knowledge. And he didn't know that they called him Anosmia not because he suffered from it but because he was capable of defining it. He dropped his head and ducked away from the crowd, following Gwyn on to Court One.

"Won't be able to concentrate today." Gwyn was shaking his wrists and bobbing around like a million-quid footballer arising ominously from the dugout. "I'll keep thinking about that maniac in my bedroom."

"What did she actually . . . How do you—"

"Oh our visitor left a calling card all right," said Gwyn with disgust.

"Christ, you don't mean she—"

"Enough. Please."

If, at seven in the morning, you had told Richard he was going to play tennis that same afternoon, he would have laughed in your face. No: not

true. He might have *tried* to laugh in your face. In any event he wouldn't have managed it. Out on court he felt he had forgotten how to play, but his body, with its sick nose, its damaged eye, seemed to remember the way it went. His body remembered. The low sun, the sun of winter, squinted into his face. When he threw the ball up to serve, an image scored itself onto the dark shutter of his eyelids; the ball burned in the bright orbit of his rackethead, like Saturn.

He had been a slave in his own life. Now he was a ghost in his own life.

How civilized, how spacious, how decent everything must have been, when his nose wasn't nuts, when his eye wasn't black. Everyone stared at him. No one sniffed at him, but everyone stared at him.

The only place he felt any good was in the Adam and Eve. No one stared at his black eye. No one noticed his black eye. This was because everyone else had a black eye. Even the men.

Gal Aplanalp didn't call.

At the Tantalus Press he continued to look kindly on the work of Keith Horridge. With poets, he realized, he was generally lenient. When in the year before he married her Gina started sleeping with writers, Richard found his jealousy reasonably easy to manage when she slept with poets—easier, much easier, than when she slept with novelists and (especially) dramatists. He liked poets because they had no power and no money.

He wrote to Horridge, giving him advice on the stanza:

> Spume retractile, the detritus
> of time. Stasis is epitaph—
> the syzygy of sand.

And Horridge reworked the stanza to make it more obscure. Maybe he should fuck up Keith Horridge. Maybe Keith Horridge was more his speed. But Richard wrote back, telling Horridge to justify the obscurity—telling Horridge that obscurity must be *earned.*

Horridge was twenty-nine. This sounded like a good age for a poet to be.

At *The Little Magazine* he secured favorable reviews for the paperback of *Saddle Leather,* a collection of short stories by the Boston-based poet and novelist Elsa Oughton, and for the out-of-print *Jurisprudential* by Stanwyck Mills, Sue and Ron L. Summerdale Professor of Law at the University of Denver.

He sat in the pub for three hours staring at the haywain of Anstice's dipped head while she explored what she considered to be her only alternative to suicide: moving into 49E Calchalk Street.

Early in December Richard had lunch with the Features Editor of the Sunday broadsheet which would be publishing his long profile of Gwyn Barry.

"What we want to know," said the Features Editor, "is what every reader wants to know: what's he really like. You know him as well as anyone. You know: what's he reall like."

They would run the piece after Gwyn's pub date: absorb the "impact."

More generally, the Features Editor went on, Richard should examine the pressures facing the successful novelist in the late 1990s.

On the day before his trial for drunken driving Richard took a spin in the Maestro: to Wroxhall Parade. Belladonna answered the door in a black two-piece suit, a black hat and a black veil. The veil held dull gray sequins in its mesh; it resembled a spider's web complete with dead flies. In the Maestro they rode to Holland Park Avenue. He didn't feel like a pimp or a pander or an agent provocateur. He felt like a minicab driver.

Gwyn treated him as such. Unsmilingly he led Belladonna off to his study, and Richard poked around in the kitchen, failing to read a new biography but successfully drinking beer.

She was quiet, and maybe even quietly tearful behind her veil, when he drove her back to Wroxhall Parade. He asked her what had happened and she kept saying Nothing.

Richard went to court and was duly admonished and fined and banned—for a year.

Demi failed her driving test for the third time.

Crash couldn't understand it. "This is beyond my comprehension," he said, as he drove her woundedly back from Walthamstow. Not only did the driving instructor and the driving examiner originate from the West Indies. They originated from the same island.

As Crash approached central London he relented, and taught Demi something nice: the use of the hazard lights to express gratitude. Often, as you joined a queue of traffic from a side road, and a fellow motorist held back to admit you, there wasn't enough time to wave or flash your thanks. A brief application of the hazard lights, however, allowed you to salute the indulgence of the car behind.

* * *

Over the chessboard, the following Sunday, Richard asked Gwyn what had happened with Belladonna.

"Nothing," he said. "What did you expect? I wanted to talk about oral sex but she just wanted to talk about *Amelior.* That book is her bible. A lot of kids seem to have taken it up. It's the message of hope, I suppose."

"*J'adoube,*" said Richard, sniffing his fingertips.

"You know it's on the syllabus. Not just in America, where you'd kind of expect it. But here in stuffy old England!"

"Mate in three," said Richard. "No. Mate in two."

Gal Aplanalp didn't call.

Once a day that slobbering fuckpig of an Englishman hurled and bounced himself down Calchalk Street at sixty miles an hour in his German car. Like a low-flying aircraft—like a drug rush . . .

Richard couldn't believe this fucking guy. This fucking guy: what was his *hurry*? Who did he think could want him anywhere a *second* sooner than he was going to get there already?

Somehow it always happened that Richard was out on the street when the German car ripped past—frozen with loathing, his imprecations tousled and tossed aside by the barreling backdraft. The drooling brute in his capsule of humorlessness. White shirt, with loosened tie, and the navy suit-top on the hook behind him.

What i it with this fucking guy? he always said out loud—driving down my street at sixty miles an hour, coming to kill my kids.

He rang Demi. "Oh I'm okay," she said. "How are you?"

"Tolerably well," he said, for this was sometimes Richard's style. His black eye had stopped being a black eye. The lid was violet, the orbit a lively—even a cheerful—yellow. "Demi, you know I'm writing this big thing on Gwyn. This means we'll have to hang out together. Lunch, for instance. A brief sea cruise, perhaps."

"On me. What are you . . . What's your—"

"My angle? The usual, I should think. What made the princess fall for the grim little Taff."

"And what's the answer?"

"I don't know."

"So you want . . .?"

"Deep background."

Then she gave him a date in mid-January and said, "I'm going home that weekend. You could come down on the Friday or the Saturday. Spend the night. It'll be very informal. Just family."

hate To„

One whose oldest son left home received instruction from Father Duryea at St. Anthony's.

One whose marriage ended traveled first to Israel, then to Africa.

They all suffered from pains. These pains were informers sent by death.

One who heard mechanical noises in his ears attached a mirror to his shoe and stood in crowds where women gathered.

One who wore his hair swiped upward from his right sideburn abjured the love of women and sought the love of men.

One who could still see the bus when the bus was nice and near started responding to the propositions written on cards and left in street-corner telephone booths.

They all kept comparing what had gone to what would come.

One abstained from meat and fish, and eggs, and fruit that failed to fall to the ground of its own accord.

One grew fat and had nightly dreams of lopping.

One bought an electric juicer and came to fear the force of electricity.

They all saw what lay behind. If they looked, they could see what lay ahead. They didn't choose to look. But at three in the morning something woke them with the fizzy rush of an old flash camera, and there they all were, staring down the sights of their lives and drawing a bead on the information.

"What does it mean anyway: 'chief me out'?"

"Like you called him *chief*. Your chiefed him out."

"What's wrong with chief? Cabbies call you chief. Chief doesn't sound too bad."

asked him. He couldn't remember. All he knew was if you get called chief then you've been chiefed out. And it can't get around that you stood there and got chiefed out."

" Wy would I chief him out? Why would chief *him* out? Why would I *tell* anyone I chiefed him out?"

"There you go. Such are the ways of our colored brethren."

"I'm assuming I got my black eye free."

"Yeah," said Steve Cousins, without any sign of amusement. "That one's definitely on the house."

"Now might be a good time to talk about money."

Richard had not been discouraged by his black-eye experience. Far from it. He felt he had traveled through the visible spectrum and had at last reached the end of the rainbow. His own life, on paper (and

much of it was on paper, written words, memos to the self, scrawled on the corners of envelopes and on the backs of credit-card slips franked by Pizza Express), seemed so hard to worsen; and yet a single blow from a muscular fist had shown it to be capable of dramatic and qualitative decline. The non-black-eye world that he was now reentering, for all its penury and hopelessness, felt like a banquet of immortality and joy. His cheekbone, this night, bore only an arid smear of yellow (not the cheerful, nursery yellow of days past but a different yellow, a dead yellow). The eye itself was no longer a tropical anemone. It had become an eye again. It had become Richard Tull again.

"Go on," he said, and sank back, and called with languor for another Zombie . . . This was the world where the body was money: the world of pornography and vassalage. Here were Gwyn Barry's organs and appendages, laid out on trays and studded with price pegs as on a butcher's shelf—or reeling and calibrating, items on the circular slide rule that an American doctor might carry in his top pocket, for instant estimates. Steve Cousins's terms, Richard thought, were staggeringly reasonable: by pledging half his fee for the Gwyn Barry profile, he could get its subject safely bedded down, in old age. Disillusionment with the literary world—that was what had brought Richard here. If Leavis had been right, if the whimpers of provincial neglect had had just cause, if the literary world was a Hong Kong of arbitrage, of graft and drink and sex: in such a world, with a ton of money and a cooling-tower of vitamin E, Richard could have attained his goal by conventional means. But the literary world wasn't like that. When it came to fucking people up, the literary world never got started. Sadness at this, and disillusionment, had brought Richard here, to the Canal Creperie, and to Steve Cousins, his familiar and his fan.

Who was telling him that he could get Gwyn killed for a thou and - for eight book reviews! Some trog from up north would do it. He comes down here with all the others, for a football match, completes his business, then digs his scarves and bobble hat out of his duffel bag and takes the train back to Worksop.

"Enchanting," said Richard. "This is pure witchcraft. But please. You were saying."

"What you do is—what you do is you turn their lives into fear. Everything they do. Everywhere they go. It's like the world has—"

"Turned against them."

"Like the world hates them."

"Go on," said Richard limply.

"So that by the time it happens, by then, they just—they just hang

their heads. They're ready. It's the end of the story. They've felt it coming. They're ready. They just hang their heads."

"This is magical. This is poetry."

"Well then."

Suddenly Richard found himself distracted and oppressed: by matters of timing. If they went ahead now, then Gwyn, one trusted, would be in no kind of shape to tour America. Which was okay: it meant, at least, that Richard could go on saying he had never been there. But would the Sunday broadsheet still want the profile? Yes. The pressures facing the successful novelist? Absolutely. He could write about the pressures exerted by that hundred-pound pulley at the end of the hospital bed, the pressures exerted by this or that cumbrous prosthesis.

"Put it on hold for now. I'm going away for the weekend with his wife," said Richard, examining his fingernails and experiencing real surprise at how much dirt they stored.

"They had a break-in."

"So I heard."

"You know what he did, the bloke? Tore all his books up. *His* books. So-called *Amelior* "

"So. A disgruntled reader."

"Yeah, or a . . ."

Now came a moment of shared disquiet. It was clear that the young man was about to say, a "literary critic." He was sharp with words, in a way, as he was sharp with everything else; but his coin-slot mouth was not designed to say it. "A literary critic": his mouth was not designed to say it.

"A good critic," said Richard.

"I was talking to Mrs. Shields?"

"I know. Your brother's mum."

"She's not working there anymore, but she's a pal of that Colombian they got. And guess what. They sleep in separate rooms."

"Who do?"

"Gwyn. And Demeter. I got something for you." He took it from his pocket and passed it across the table under the shell of his palm. A section of glossy paper, tightly and elaborately folded, like origami. "That's in exchange," he said, "for the smack."

The possibility of additional or parallel universes, of which there may well be an infinity, presents the writer with something new to worry about. Shakespeare is the universal. That is to say, he plays well enough in *this* universe, with its sodium and cesium and helium. But how would he go down in all the others?

Such questions were far from 13's thoughts. He was in the orange van with Lizzete. Engine on: for the warmth.

13 exhaled plangently. He was, as usual, nursing a sense of strictly local injustice. He'd had a call from the halfway house: the leader of his Probation Program, informing 13 that the Harrow Road police were going to charge him with 43 burglaries. 43! Harrow Road! The worst. They stitch you up. 43 burglaries. And he'd only done 29 of them.

Lizzete said, "We could go in the back."

He said, "Can't. Giro there. He's wrecked. Up all night driving."

She did something.

He said, "Leave it out is it."

Lizzete was 14, 13 knew. 14 at the oldest. As always when he was with her 1-on-1, 13 was struggling to keep his relationship with Lizzete on a professional footing. He still had his shirt and his sateen wind-cheater on—but his trousers were down th e e. Lizzete had taken her pants off. She had even taken her chewing gum out. And stuck it on the speedo . . . Professional footing. Pleasure doing business with her. For example, he set Lizzete to knock on doors. Anyone home at that number: "You have a girl called Mina living here? . . . Sorry to bother!" Worked well. Don't want to be going in there blind. Don't want to be doing a creeper. Tiptoe is it. Anything comes down and you have to give someone a tap: Aggravated. Statutory: you're 4-walling it for 3 years. End of story. 3 years: 24–7, 24–7. Jesus: 60–60, 24–7, 52, 52, 52. Time I come out, Lizzete be 17. No worries. Take her down the Paradox.

"Here you are," said Lizzete, though it sounded like "eeh-ah" or "E–R."

"Yat," said 13. "Ooh intense."

He had a white man in his head. At this sexual moment, his head had a white man in it: Scozzy. Who'd said he'd be out straightaway or might be some time. Covertly 13 peered over Lizzete's shoulder: Giro's body was gathered steeply in sleep, like an ancient hassock. (His other mode was all floppy and invertebrate, like a vast dog omelette or even a huntsman's rug made from his own coat.) So, yeah, they could slide in there easy, between the dog and the gardening tools, which 13 was selling on. Ten minutes. If Minder came out he could hide her behind Giro. Bung a blanket on her. Still, you didn't want to be taking it too far with a 14-year-old that wanted to get pregnant. 13 knew that Lizzete was jealous of her 15-year-old sister Patrice, who was pregnant and no mistake. Who was out h e e. They thought it got them council flats, having a youth, but it didn't, not anymore. They wouldn't listen. Tories or whatever. Her mum'd kill him.

It was not the black woman that stopped him, though: it was the white man. For 13 had long sensed, very accurately, that you didn't want to be around Scozzy with anything sexual. While to the white man the thought of the black man was some kind of antic aphrodisiac, the presence of Scozzy, with his sallow stare, in 13's head definitely went the other way. You wouldn't ever want to present the man with it. Simple as.

"Tell you what," said 13. "What say we do 68."

"68?"

"68."

"What's 68?"

"You do me and I owe you 1."

"13!"

"Take it or leave it or whatever."

Lizette left it. She left altogether, after a while. Just as well, thought 13. With an unhappy expression he fussed and sighed and softly flinched over the paper tissues. Don't want to fuck that one off. Good business relationship. Adolf emerged at twelve-forty-five, with his book, silent, satisfied. Run the man home and go out looking for a laugh.

"Oi. What's this?"

Chewing gum on the speedo! 13 scraped it off and popped it between his lips. 8 his haste he immediately swallowed its cold gray hardness.

Maybe they all had what Richard didn't have.

13 had it. Walk down the street with him and you wouldn't be seeing any of the things he saw. He saw earners and turners and leavers and levers, he saw locks and catches, what was unguarded and what protruded, what was detachable, what was transferable. 8 any shop his eyes glittered with compound calculation.

Scozzy had it, though he had it the wrong way round. Animal thermovision, in the city; the night-sight of the wild boy.

Belladonna had it. 8 the business of reinvention, the first act is that of renaming. The novelist does this all the time, on the page. On the street, the only thing you can rename is yourself, and everyone else you know, if you like, so that everyone has two names, just as everyone on television has two names.

Even Darko had it. When he came to London, with his bag of tools, the very air over Oxford Circus was rank with pornography, the shop windows were stills in duty-free brochures, and the cars bulged and shimmied like women, the clios, the starlets, the princesses of the street.

8 truth (and we must face this), Lady Demeter Barry poses difficulties of representation. She poses difficulties of representation not just

because she is a pretty blonde (with a full bosom) who is related to the Queen, nor yet because she kept various ponies and was addicted to cocaine and heroin and slept with one or two black men. In the Queen's extended family, being a junkie, like keeping a pony, is standard stuff: the landscaped grounds of the higher-priced detox clinics are like lawn parties at Sandringham. Sleeping with black men, on the other hand, shows us Demi's more adventurous side. Girls of every other class do that, perhaps because, among other less elusive attractions, it's the only thing left that their mothers haven't done. But girls of the nobility, with exceptions, don't sleep with black men. I can't think why not, if it's half as much fun as everyone says it is. We noted earlier that the black man, very commonly, serves as a sexual thought-experiment for his white counterpart: he is your gifted surrogate; he is your supersub. I myself have a bro in my head—Yo!—who, after much ritual handslapping, takes over when I'm tired or can't come, or on those nights when I've got a headache or I'm washing my hair. (The polite phrase for this habit is imaginative delegation: whoever he is—masterfully glistening, in the fantasy, over your wife or girlfriend or pin-up or pick-up—he isn't you.) . . . Otherness is exciting. Miscegenation is exciting. So, with all this going for it, why don't the girls of the nobility do it more? Racial guilt, egalitarian guilt, is exciting: it excites compassion in the female breast. But maybe this guilt only works when it's vague—a presentment, an unease. With the nobility, maybe, the guilt is all too palpable and proximate. The De Rougemounts were famous alike for their piety and rapacity. Demi's great-granddad, with his "extensive interests" in the West Indies. Demi's granddad, with his South African diamond mines. And then the polluting, scorching, forest-razing, rubble-bouncing speculations of Demi's father, thirteenth Earl of Rieveaulx. The guilt is still real. The spell is still fast and good.

Representationally, though, this isn't the difficulty. The representational difficulty posed by Demi has to do with the way she speaks: the way she puts sentences together. For some reason it is the destiny of Richard Tull to be surrounded by idioglots. Idioglots, with their idiolects.

Demi's linguistic quirk is essentially and definingly female. It just is. Drawing in breath to denounce this proposition, women will often come out with something like "Up you!" or "Ballshit!" For I am referring to Demi's use of the conflated or mangled catchphrase—Demi's speech-bargains: she wanted two for the price of one. The result was expressive, and you usually knew what she meant, given the context. But here's the difficulty. In fictional prose the idiolect spells trouble because the novel-

ist, subliminally trained to reveal character through action, duly contorts his narrative to provide cute walk-ons for the next spoonerism, malapropism, pleonasm. Better, in my view, just to make a list.

So Demi said "vicious snowball" and "quicksand wit" and "up gum street"; she said "worried stiff" and "beyond contempt" (though not "beneath belief"); she said "on its death legs" and "hubbub of activity" and "what's with it with her?" and "tell him no flat out"; she said "none of my luck" and "when it comes down to the crunch"; she said "greaseboat" (as opposed, presumably, to "dreamball"); she said "he lost his top" and "she blew her rag"; she said "he coughed up" (he confessed) and "she fluffed it" (she killed herself). Once, just once, she murmured, "Sorry. I was talking aloud." Demi also pronounced her *r*s as *w*s, but I don't think I'm even going to begin to attempt that.

I said at the outset that Demeter, like Gina, had no connection with literature other than marriage to one of its supposed practitioners. This isn't quite true. This is never quite true. We all have our connections with literature, wittingly or not so wittingly. How else do we explain the intensity of Richard's interest? Everybody knew that he was going down to Byland Court to spend the weekend with Lady Demeter. His wife knew; her husband knew; the Features Editor of the Sunday broadsheet knew. But nobody knew how Demi filled his mind, sometimes—how he burned across town at her.

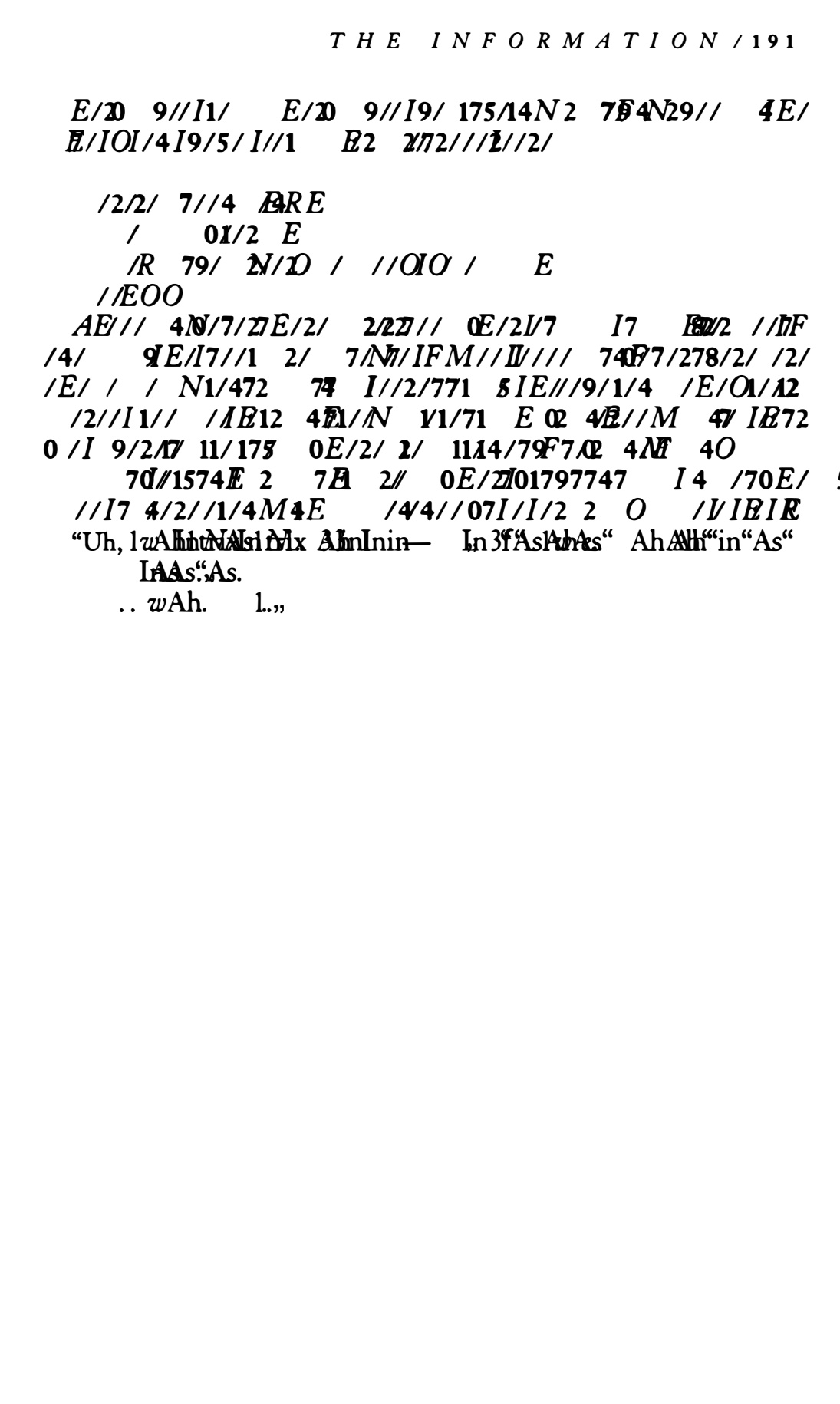
If you could gather together all a man's past lovers (the lovers of a modern midlifer, averagely promiscuous) and line them up in chronological order, as in a *catalogue raisonné*, as in the long passage of a gallery or museum: for the retrospective . . . You would begin with shocking diversity, with the wide-sweep eclectic. Moving along the line the viewer's eye would jump up, down, start back, all heights, all weights, all colorings. Then after a while a pattern would establish itself; the repetition of certain themes would eventually situate you in one genre or another, until you came to the last woman in the show, the crystallized: and that's your wife. So things had gone, more or less, with Richard. The arrow of obsession pointed to Gina. All the girls, all the women, got bendier and coilier and craftier—until you came to Gina. Her eyes, her mouth, the i of her waist: these were his *Collected Poems*. Whereas members of the subgenre that Demi roamed, the big round baby-powder blondes, were never numerous and petered out a long way back down the line. Though he had been awfully pleased to see them at the time. Richard was forty. He paid many visits to this passage. His life was this passage. The world was this passage.

Still, aristocratic lineage, great wealth, comparative youth, an air of vulnerability, a full bosom: wouldn't that about cover it, universally? Did Demi need anything literary, to ignite Richard's passion?

Yes. First, the big parties she used to throw for writers. Deliriously, ravenously, Richard sent his mind back to the napkin-scarved bottles of old champagne tipped his way by tuxedoed athletes (even the help was hip, was hot) and bims in ra-ra skirts offering canapes made of dodo G-spots and hummingbird helmets, in the octagonal library, where he had mingled with the knowers and philosopher kings of the living word—while all the agents and editors and publishers cowered in their nimbus of pelf and preferment: men and women who shunned him; men and women whose secretaries hung up on him without blinking; men and women whose letters he opened like some Soviet janitor getting a personal summons from Stalin . . . Hoping to impress Gwyn Barry (or, more honestly, hoping to depress him), Richard had taken his friend to the salon of Lady Demeter de Rougemount. And look what happened.

Other than that, Richard had information on Demi now, and information always points to the vulnerable—the hidden. Secrets, female secrets, tend to the poetic, like the birthmark that her rumpled shirtcollar sometimes failed to conceal: Demi's port-wine stain, which rose and glowed when she was flustered or distressed. Really she was offering the world only an excerpt of the truth. Demi had gone from the grottolike chapel at Byland Court to the cash machine on the high street at midnight (making two withdrawals, at 11:59 and 12:01: this was drugs knowledge). The element that rescued her face from mere youth-dependant prettiness was the appetite, the taste for disobedience and dissolution. It put depth into her eyes and made them humorous and propitiatory; it complicated her mouth, her teeth; it meant that her hair couldn't quite conform to its sheen and bob. Her appetite was not vulpine; it was loose and shrugging. She was hurt, she was sorry. That was just how she was. Love might have expanded her. But we are not all of us going to get loved. We are not all of us going to get expanded. She and her husband slept in separate beds, in separate bedrooms. Richard understood. He and Gina still turned in together; but they were sleeping in separate beds. Richard understood. - I for an I.

The representational difficulty remains. My suspicion remains. Demeter's dimensions are one short of the three. It does happen. Gina, too, maybe. If writers drain life out of those around them, if writers are vampires, are nightmares . . . To be clear: I don't come at these people.



The railway station had changed since he had last had call to use it. In the meantime its soot-coated, rentboy-haunted vault of tarry girders and toilet glass had become a flowing atrium of boutiques and croissant stalls and limitless cappuccino. Trains no longer dominated it with their train culture of industrial burdens dumbly and filthily borne. Trains now crept in round the back, sorry they were so late, hoping they could still be of use to the proud, strolling, cappuccino-quaffing shoppers of the mall. There was even a brand-new Dickensian pub called the Olde Curiosity Shoppe whose set was dressed with thousands of books—written not by Dickens but by that timeless band of junkshop set-dresser nobodies . . . In other words, the station had gone up in the world. And Richard didn't like it. He wanted everything to stay down in the world—with him. Envy and schadenfreude and invidiousness: they arise from poor character, but also from a fear of desertion. The entrance to the platform he stood at called itself the Gateway to East Anglia. Monolithically overweight, like a prehistoric snake that had eaten not a mastodon or a mammoth but another snake of the same dimensions, the train moved toward him with its yellow eyes satedly averted. Asian and West Indian staff stood ready with their black ten-gallon rubbish bags. Richard stiffened in his soiled bow tie.

It was over. It was all pretty much over. That morning, in the post, he had received a lustrous envelope from the offices of Gal Aplanalp. On wrenching it open he found, not a book contract for *Untitled*, but an invoice for the many photocopies made of its typescript. The sum demanded was large enough to constitute a rumor of ruin for Richard; worse, it spelled good news for another of Gal's clients, Gwyn Barry, whose physical sufferings, in consequence, might have to be modified or abridged. In front of his assembled family Richard left the kitchen table and weaved his way toward the sitting-room chaise longue. He didn't collapse on top of it. He crawled in underneath it. One by one the boys came to peer at him with their upside-down faces. It was all pretty much over . . . Richard didn't look out at the day that was now moving past him. In prefiguration of its actual death, the sun or its nimbus hung vastly expanded above the milky medium of the troposphere. You could stare at it—a necessarily rare privilege. A deity you could stare at would not be a deity. A sun you could stare at would be no good to you: it would

never have given you life. Rain came. Rain made the landscape heavier, and impeded it: the sopping trees, the steeped sheep. Richard looked up. A canal was unraveling parallel to the leaning, yawing train. There was a solitary barge, moored to the reeds, its chimney smoking; presumably a tramp sat within it, under this squall just made for him. It wouldn't be too bad, thought Richard. Our thick coats, our baked beans. Pleasantly drugged by the reek of paraffin . . .

It was over. It was getting nearer to being over. He looked for clues—in the daily crucifixion of the crossword. Ten years ago it used to take him ten minutes to finish the wide-grid Tiresias: he finished it on the can. Five years ago he was usually doing about half of it. Twelve months ago he was still doing about half of it; but all his answers (he would discover the next day) were wrong. They interlocked all right; but they were all wrong. Nowadays things had improved: he couldn't do any of it. This morning two clues in particular taunted and traduced him. One was:

> Eggy? virydn

The other was:

> Going in at number eight for Zimbabwe, Gloucestershire opener joins tailender for Glamorgan (when Other unfit to play) to produce new ball with clear appeal for the philoprogenitive (3)

He pushed the thing aside and tried to sleep but just sat there with his head banging against the wall. Why trains? Why rails? Why tracks and smokestacks? Richard would go on asking himself these pointless questions for a while, presumably, as artists will. But these questions were now altogether pointless. He was leaving the reconstruction business. So he had no business asking them.

At his destination he was met, not by Demi, but by a plump youth in a bulbous washable jacket, son of gatekeeper or gamekeeper. No gate or game to keep, not anymore; so just this plump youth, at the wheel of his mobile gardener's hut, marooned for life among the lanes and hedges. Richard bounced along, up hill and down dale. The road might have been taking him back down his own central nervous system, to the past, to childhood and its green world, unfallen, where the lion lay down with the lamb and the rose grew without thorn. ; the city you looked for this world, in Dogshit Park, in the Warlock AstroTurf, in the ravings of the wild boy, in the leaden pages of Amelio The green world symbolized the

triumph of summer over winter; symbolizing that triumph, though, was ywz the green world could do, because here was winter and the cold he feared.

"Nearly there now."

Accurately, and with the caress of social unease, Richard felt that the land was being sculpted, was becoming, in fact, a garden, but on a sickening scale. Behold a sickening gardener, one thousand feet tall, with his sickening scythe, his huge harrow, his reaping hook, his mile-long trenchworks and earthworks, the terrible topiarist: those trees pregathered on the knoll, that planned plateau, those layered gouges to make the hillside frown or sneer.

The van dropped him off in a rear courtyard and he was directed toward the kitchen—where Demi was, and where all her sisters were: Lady Amaryllis, Lady Callisto, Lady Urania, Lady Persephone. With his small but respectably battered suitcase Richard entered a room where, against all expectation, he was greeted with mandatory informality: the four sisters, the four titled dairy maids each with a titled tit out and a baby at the end of it, and six or seven additional infants with their eternal cadences of weariness and demand, plus crunchy coughs, pi-dog sneezes, hiccup pulses, hold-everything retchings and of course the many scales of infant grief. These sounds were eternal, but louder here, and richer in eructation, because of the incredible squalor, as Demi explained.

"It's not just the babies," she said. "Everyone who comes here spends most of their time in the loo."

And you could hear it, you could hear it, the whoop and whoops of baby burp, fart and gag, continuous and cartoonish, like a baby one-man band, the perpetual motion of air.

"You'll be at it too. Can't you just smell all the dead mice?"

He drank his coffee, among the staring eyes and streaming noses and dangling, bootied feet. This was olfactory forgiveness—olfactory deliverance. Richard sat there, sniffing his fingertips; but his nose, he liked to believe, was finally on the mend. He seldom thought he smelled of shit. He seldom thought, even, that he smelled of batch. What he thought he smelled of now was s i n . And that just couldn't be right. Spinst, he said to himself (and it was quite a riff by now). Come on. Spinst. How obvious has it got to get that your nose is dicking you around? Spinst: what clearer proof could there be that your nose is absolutely f l of it?

"Richard's writing a long piece about Gwyn."

The sisters turned to him with considered expressions.

"You're not going to get a tape recorder out or anything?"

"No no. You just do what you'd do anyway. And I'll observe. Sleepily. What I'm really here for," said Richard, "is to sleep."

Though not warm or anything like that, the house they were in (itself boundless, but distinct from the stately home, which lay to their flank somewhere, like a regiment) had the internal feel of an oven or a furnace; everywhere you went you heard the parched lungs of ancient bellows, the gasp of pilot light. The floorboards hummed and tickled shod feet with the work of the hidden hypocaust. This senile apparatus was augmented, in the unheatably high-ceilinged hall, by an open log fire, before which, on the sofa, a gravid Labrador anxiously awaited the arrival of her puppies. Sour smoke hovered and idled, bringing tears to the eyes—to the eyes of the Labrador and to the eyes of the old woman who sat there stroking her . . . Damply melded heaps of wellies and anoraks, every toilet bowl gruffly splattered and tire-tracked, every surface padded with dust as thick as iron filings. 8 Demi's parents two Catholic dynasties had come together. It wasn't that the Earl and the Countess loved dirt and decay. They just didn't see it. When they used the barn-dark kitchen, if they ever did, piety and pride forbade awareness of the crisped gunge in the cooker and the smell of sweet damp cardboard that heaved from the opened fridge. They didn't see it or smell it—the merely worldly. But the daughters did, and laughed at it, and added to it all with their oozing young.

Unlike the nostrils of another visitor to another great Catholic seat, Richard' nostrils, sensitive though they were, luckily failed to flare at the sight of a "high, insolent dome." But he had had good times in big coun- p houses, when he was younger, and more insolent. He was practiced at skulking around inside them, stealing drinks, and avoiding church; and he had crept down many a popping furlong of corridor with his shoes in his hands. Further, he had crouched in banks of reeds and blazed with shotguns at flocks of ducks (which, on undulating wings of gratitude and sincerity, were heading home to their rightful rest). He had sat crammed with huge brothers in huge cars on the way to horse-brassed pubs on Sunday mornings (Brother One, speaking of a married blonde: "I've slimed with her too." Second Brother: "Liar!" First Brother: "Test me!" Second Brother: "What color's her minge?" First Brother: "Black!"). He had quaffed sloe gin at six in the morning and engaged in bun fights and then climbed onto a horse and bobbed around in pursuit of some ferret or weasel until he fell off again. Most centrally, he had assumed the missionary position with several hefty daughters of the nobility and gentry, and bounced around until everything smelled of come and they made a joke, and told them who Chekhov was and why rain fell and how it turned out that airplanes could not stand stationary in the sky. Richard had wondered, throughout, when all this was going to end, but he went

away and then went back and it just kept staggering on. This particular dynasty, in any case, awaited cancellation. Although the Earl had sired five daughters, patiently crippling his wife in quest of an heir, and although those daughters had presented their husbands with many a Jeremy and Jasper and Joseph, the estate was of course patrilinear, and would veer off elsewhere soon.

The day cleared. Its roof of cloud began to leak, like a colander, and the poles of refracted fire looked splay-legged, as if their apex lay at airplane height—nineteen thousand yards, perhaps, and not ninety million miles. Without changing his clothes, and using a wooden racket, he played tennis with Demi, Urania, and Callisto on a court so rich in excrescences and asperities that his choice of groundstroke—forehand or backhand—necessarily depended on the ball's right-angled bounce. Then, with his hands on his hips, he admired the swimming pool. Thermals of yeasty activity rose from its mantle of peat-thick green. Richard didn't want to swim in it; he wouldn't have minded drinking it, but he didn't want to swim in it. Side by side he and Demi walked down freshly dripping avenues. They visited conservatories and hothouses, grottoes and gazebos, bowers and arbors, follies and wildernesses; Richard's notebook was in and out of his pocket, signaling his professional interest, as Demi told tales of lost kittens, beloved ponies, myxomatotic marmots, rabid rabbits, and so on, and apostasies and conflagrations and wartime commandeerings and royal visits . . . Listening is good, he thought; listening is always good. They approached the kitchen, through the kitchen garden. She lost her footing on the path and he reached out to steady her. Richard was biding his time.

He found a gym-sized library that contained not a single readable book, not even any Trollope. So he went to sleep in it. The room was dark when Demi woke him with a cup of tea, and a biscuit. She remained at his side, on the tasseled sofa, holding her teacup with both hands as if it contained something sacramental like incense or holy warmth; her blue-jeaned thighs were widely and rigidly parted, her feet erectly tensed on their toes. He watched her face in its offered profile, how it wavered and resolved itself—the bitten underlip, the tremors. Of course it seemed obvious enough what the immediate trouble was. Unborn babies were swirling round her head, like flocks of puti.

"You're the middle sister."

"I'm an aunt twelve times over. Gwyn is very worried about the state of the world."

"Well he could have fooled me."

"He's even talked about having that operation."

Richard had recently read about (sitting there with a twin on either side of him) had fled such a tower by climbing down her own hair: the big-hair princess. ; his own fantasies of escape, he often saw himself clambering from that bedsit in Blackfriars—that eyrie of spinst—on the rope ladder of Anstice's crackling rug . . . For some mysterious or even magical reason, their little belfry, as Demi said, was "lovely and warm." It had served as the bedroom of one of the household's fabled nannies, long deceased. They sat side by side on her narrow cot, whose springs, presumably, had never creaked in passion.

"This thing Gwyn does," said Richard, adjusting his notebook, "when he stares at things in that rapt way, like an orange or a pencil. i a child might. When did he start doing that?"

"He used to get very fed up when people said how simple his writing was. He said it was as if he'd written a children's book. Anyway he started doing it around then."

". . . This carpentry thing. He doesn't actually *do* carpentry, does he?"

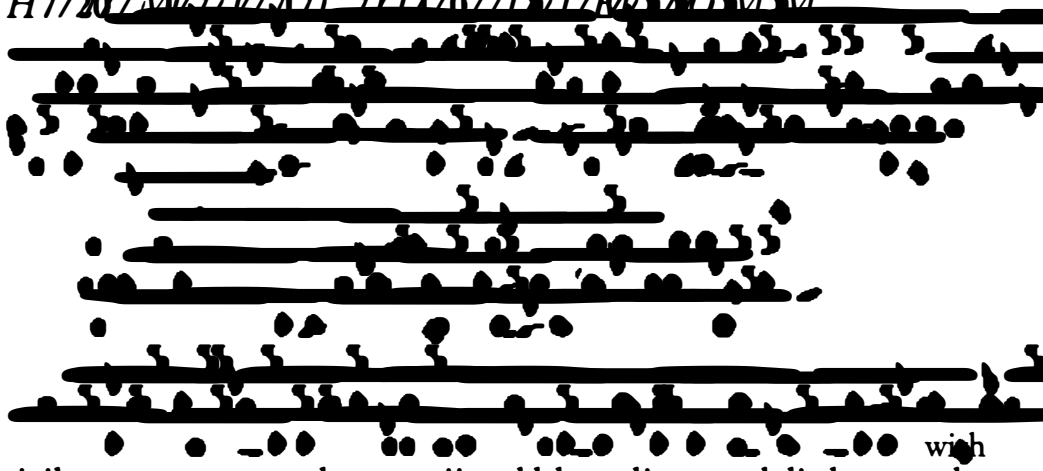
"Never. Except he did a bit . . . He told somebody that writing was like carpentry so he thought he'd better get some carpentry stuff in case people asked if he did carpentry, and then he did a bit of carpentry just incase."

Women's foreheads, sometimes, provide the punctuation for their speech: underlinings, accents g ave and ai g , the puzzled circumflex, sad umlauts, wistful cedillas.

"What made you fall for him?"

Unlike Richard, Demi had changed for dinner: a tight gray cardigan, a light gray skirt. Her shoes lay on the floor, still imitating her characteristic stance: heel-to-heel, obtuse-angled. Her legs were tucked up beneath her, but now she unfolded herself and slid up onto her knees, and turned, folding her arms on the narrow vent of the windowsill. Richard stared: the two lanes of Demi's thighs, entering the tunnel of her skirt. Where is the middle of women, he wondered; where is the center of their gravitational pull? In different places. ; the color of the mouth's interior, in the breathy and gulpy laxity of the lungs. ; the gap or wake between the thighs, where no flesh is, a flute of air the shape of a cocktail glass, where he sensed the invisible quicksilver of gin . . . He put down his pen and pad and moved up beside her. Their cheeks were almost touching as she said,

"I could always come up here and know everything would be just as it had always been. People think that people like me don't have to struggle. But I have struggled. Oh, I could tell you a couple of tales or two, don't you worry. I got . . . so lost for a while. I'm still lost. I still have to take it one day at a time. One day at a time."



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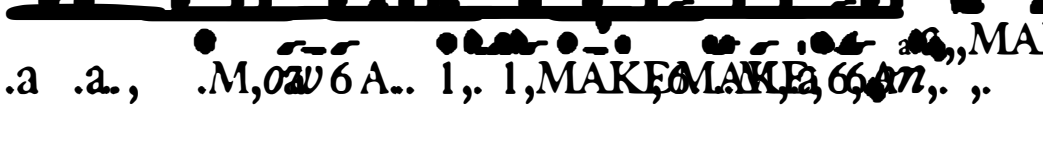

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could hear the van, revving—revving against the cold and damp. It was almost over.

He got back to Calchalk Street at six o'clock the next morning. Prominently displayed on the kitchen table was a couriered package from the offices of Gal Aplanalp. It contained a bottle of champagne and an envelope, which he opened in turn. The letter said:

> Although there has as yet been no response here in England, we have positive news from America. Untitled has been accepted by Bold Agenda, Inc., of New York. This is a small imprint, recently launched; they are unable to offer an advance, but the royalty percentage will be correspondingly readjusted in your favor. Roy Biv, your editor there, is very enthusiastic and hopes that we can all get behind the book. They want Untitled in their spring list: of course, you will be there, with Gwyn, for publication. This could turn out well for you. I hope you're pleased.

Richard did what Gina did when he asked her to marry him: he assented with a sneeze of tears. in hour later he still had his face in his hands when his wife came lightly down the stairs, and carefully approached. He looked up. A weekend in the country had reduced him to the condition of a barely usable scarecrow. Black-eyed, flare-trousered, and rigid. All night he had juddered, as if in vibrant motion, on the ice-locked rails.

"Oh, what have you done to yourself?"

Behind her, across the passage, Marius and Marco were waking. You could hear them croak and stretch.

"No it's all right, it's all right. I don't know quite how it happened. But I think everything's going to be all right."

I saw the yellow dwarf today. Not the one up there (the weather has been bad). But the one down here (the weather has been bad). A single picture said it all.

The thing was, I think she had a date. Short skirt, high heels, new hairdo. Of course, any description of her appearance and get-up immediately involves you in niceties of scale. Any skirt, on the yellow dwarf, would have been short, and any heels would have been high. Nevertheless, short was her skirt and high were her heels. And her big-hair hairdo, similarly, seemed doubly big—prodigiously, recklessly big . . .

For a moment, for that flashbulb snapshot of time, before the pathetic sepia had a chance to form on the plate—I felt usurped. Me, myself: I was big enough to show the yellow dwarf a big time in, say, Big Top Pizza. Now wait. She stood in a doorway, with others, a hole in the wall between the enchained off-license and the appliance emporium to which, and from which, Richard Tull sometimes staggers, furled in the tartan coils of his vacuum cleaner. The yellow dwarf, with others, was sheltering from the rain; the crowded doorway dankly steamed—with cooling vapor, with the dark breath of traffic, and with the trailing edge of one of those London mists made entirely of respiratory betrayals and the gasps of asthmatics. She looked down: her puckered shirt, her ruined shoes. She looked up, with maximum defiance, through the gap in the sodden hedge of her hair.

It so happens that I know quite a lot about dating—down at that end of the scale. As a man who stands five-feet-six-inches tall (or five-feet-six-and-one-half-inches, according to a passport I once had), I know about dating and size. In my early teens I was at least a foot shorter. My mother kept telling me I would "shoot up." I was still asking her, at the age of twenty: "What's all this about me shooting up?" (It never happened; but I grew; and I have no complaints, anymore, about five-feet-six.) Thirty years ago my very slightly older but very much taller brother would sometimes arrange foursomes for my benefit: my brother's girlfriend would be asked to bring a girlfriend along—or a sister. And I would wait, in a doorway, while he made a rendezvous and then report back, saying, "Come on. She's tiny"—or else (shaking his head), "Sorry, Mart."; which case I would perhaps follow him at a distance and watch him rejoin the two sixty-inch giantesses at the entrance to the milk bar or under the lit portals of the Essoldo or the Odeon, and then numbly make my way home in the probable rain.

But this rain, probably, almost certainly, was just ordinary rain, and not the Old Testament deluge that had engulfed and ruined the yellow dwarf. She stood in the doorway, with all the other flashflood amphibians. The makeup, the get-up—the tide-marks round her ankles, like socks; and her face in full defiance under the flattened hedge of the big hair. And I had to think: this is awful. But you tried to make too little go too far. You tried to make so very little go so very far.

. . . The information is telling me to stop saying hi and to start saying *bye*.

PART *THREE*

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erased (even that whispered query of nicotine, high on the cheekbone), his nose as sane as any other nose (his nose now basked on the shores of reason), his air of pitying detachment in the offices of the Tantalus Press ("It will be a relief to return to your metrical meditations," he had written to Keith Horridge, "after the brouhaha of publication in the States"), his quite frequent renderings of Respect as he showered and shaved (having made love successfully, or at least undeniably, to Gina the night before—" W at you want: baby I got"), his slurred promise to Gwyn, which helped foreclose an otherwise pleasant dinner at Holland Park, that he was going to run him out of t o n: seeing and hearing all this, you might have thought that, yes, here was a writer on a roll. He had put in a lot of time with Anstice, patiently steering her away from her latest plan (that of committing suicide at Calchalk Street) and encouraging her to take that brief but restorative holiday in the Isle of Mull (the Isle of Mull, in mid-March, he reckoned, would get Leibniz himself drooling over his pill jar). He had called off Steve Cousins, an exquisitely delicate operation, in which he had eaten a lot of shit, and during which he had felt great and immediate harm skittishly considering his person; calmer himself, he had glimpsed the white-capped tormenta in the digital grid of the young man's face; and walking home that night, from the Canal Creperie, he had sensed a kind of thunder at the back of his neck, which never broke. He had not called Belladonna. He had lunched uneventfully with Lady Demeter (and was even pretty sorry to hear about her father's pretty serious heart attack, which had hobbled him that same Sunday night—and apparently within twenty minutes of Richard's departure). But did he hate Gwyn any less? That would have been the key to it. Did he hate Gwyn any less?

In any event Richard was persisting in the belief that a rewarding experience lay ahead of him, despite his immediate discomforts, despite his adhesive doubts about Bold Agenda, Inc., and despite the pillow of crimson tissue paper that he clutched to his face. Soon after take off, while the plane was still climbing, about a period's worth of blood had burst from his right nostril. Now, as he settled down with his beer and his biography, and looked forward to the lunch that was edging ever nearer, about a period's worth of blood burst from his left nostril. Richard's nose, it seemed, was once again a reliable instrument; it just happened to contain a gallon of restless gore. He bent and squeezed himself toward the aisle, past the child, its single parent, and another, older child, and joined the queue for that most despised section of the aircraft, Toilet World—deep in the machine's rump. After his first visit there he had rested on the haunch of the emergency-exit door and

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to Chip. "Is Chuck there?" Yu mean Chip. "Then give me Chip." Yu want Chuck. And they were never there. Richard couldn't decide whether Chuck and Chip were the same person (like Darko and Ranko), who was permanently absent, or whether both Chip and Chuck were the inventions of a third person called something like Chup or Chick. The only editor he ever got through to, these days, was an inoffensive-sounding guy who went by the name of Leslie Evry.

Gwyn said, "So what have they got lined up?"

"I said. I won't know till I get there."

"But this is America, man! You got to get out there. You got to go for it."

Richard waited.

"You got to come on strong. Talk big and kick ass."

"Let's get this straight. Are you trying to be funny, or is it your intention to pretend to be American while we're there?"

Gwyn sank back, and gave his schedule a careless brandish. "You know, you're lucky. This is just show business. While I'm scurrying around out there, you'll have time to absorb everything. Time to think. To ponder. Time to dream. Are you all right, mate? You look a bit pale. But it could be the light."

And the light was coming in sideways, and everything looked combustible or already white-hot, close to burnout or heat-death.

"I had a nosebleed. I haven't seen so much blood since the twins were born. I used up two whole cans' worth of tissues and towels."

"Beautiful flying weather."

"It's always sunny, you know. Above the clouds."

"I got you up here, and it took some doing, so you could see what it's like. For your piece."

Then, for Richard's further benefit, Gwyn cast his gaze round the cabin with an expression that judiciously combined embarrassment and mischief. "Who would have thought it? A boy from the valleys. Flying to America first class."

"Do you mind if I use that line?"

"It's nice, though, isn't it? Dead comfy."

"The sickbags," Richard said dully, "look no better or bigger than the ones in Coach. And they still have turbulence here. And it still takes seven hours. I'll see you on the ground."

He made his way back, past Mageta Rhapsody and Of / ngl Blod, past Carel and Avarce and The Usre, and into the multitudinousness of Hard Times, *La* Pese, Amerka, Desair The Moontone, Labrnths... Two people—a man in Business and some dope in Coach—were reading Amelior the paperback.

"Have the meeting during the signing. And I can get photographed while I'm getting photographed. Phyllis Widener. Richard Tull."

Richard knew from his Amelior Regained publicity pack that Phyllis Widener had a bold-print twice-weekly column in one of the New York tabloids: personalities, arts, local politics. Wry seniority was her thing; she was meant to be twinkly and unfoolable. That's what you got when you were old: experience. And maturity too. ; person, Phyllis seemed to be the kind of American woman who had taken a couple of American ideas (niceness, warmth) and then turned up some dreadful dial, as if these qualities, like the yield of a hydrogen bomb, had no upper limit—the range had no top to it—and just went on getting bigger and better as you lashed them toward infinity. Only her colleagues and superiors knew that the pieces she wrote, over many hours and many cups of strong coffee in her small and memento-strewn apartment on Thirteenth Street, often and increasingly turned out to be unusably vicious . . . Richard found a bit of hotel notepaper and a hotel biro and dragged up a chair. He was immediately rewarded with a good bit for his piece: Gwyn pausing mid-word, actually mid-syllable (halfway through "unsophisticated"), like a machine himself, when Phyllis's tape clicked off at the end of its spool; he sat there with his mouth open, on pause, while she replaced it. Meanwhile too it became clear that the energies of the publicity boy were directed not to the further accrual of publicity opportunities but to their radical attenuation.

"Unsophisticated approach, then that's their opinion. I prefer to liken it to carpentry."

"Are you a carpenter, Gwyn?"

"With wood, a poor one, Phyllis. With words, well, I have my molds and templates, my spirit level, my trusty saw."

"I think it's so beautiful the way you say that."

"You know. Pottering away."

The interview ended, and the room thinned out, and Gwyn, who looked fresh enough to Richard, went to freshen up next door. So he was left alone with Phyllis; he sat there, rinsed in her entirely embarrassing gaze, and duly began to interview Phyllis about her interview with Gwyn. After a minute and a half he had no more questions.

Preceded by the publicity boy, Gwyn passed through the room. He was expected downstairs in the restaurant, to be interviewed.

"I have been busy," he said to Richard, "on your behalf. How's your schedule? There's a press interview in Miami and a big radio slot in Chicago. And a reading-signing in Boston. I was wondering if you could work them in."

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Wnthrop Praed, 1802-1839 and then curled up with AntiLati t ina r an: The Heretical Career of Franc i Atterbu r . At one in the morning, by which point his day was twenty-five hours old, he went out into New York. A brief turn, in his mack, along Central Park South.

He knew American fiction, and he knew that fiction, considered in aggregate, would not lie. For him, coming to America was like dying and going to hell or heaven and finding it all as advertised. Take hell: black fire and darkness visible, the palpable obscure—and ice, to starve your soft ethereal warmth: the anti-universe of the damned. New York was out there and he didn't have any time to think about it. But he knew, the instant he arrived on its streets, that New York was the most violent thing that men had ever done to a stretch of land, more violent, in its way, than what was visited on Hiroshima, at ground zero, on day one. He looked up. He looked up and saw no difference: the usual metropolitan sky with its six or seven stars weakly guttering. Raw land can do nothing about them but cities hate stars and don't want their denizens to be reminded of how it really goes with ourselves and the universe.

"So!" said Leslie ft hsettling back in the swivel chair with his hands interjoined behind his head. "What brings you to our fair land?"

Richard had to hear this again. This was great. The whole adventure had lasted five seconds. And here he was: wiped out.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What brings you," repeated Leslie ft hwith brio, "to our fair land?"

Richard had been asked this question several times already—by liftmen, by barmen. Now he was hearing it from Bold Agenda. He was hearing it from his own future. Of course, Richard liked to think of himself as a virtuoso of rejection; his history of humiliation was long—was long and proud. The humiliated are always looking for consideration and getting the unconsidered, the offhand and ready-made. So Richard sat there, devastated, wiped out, by a reflexive banality from Leslie ft k

"What brings me to your fair land? I somehow ran away with the idea that l had a novel coming out in your fair land."

"You certainly do. Seen this?"

He was handed a slender flyleaf or bookmark. On it were listed ten or twelve titles. There he was, near the bottom. Richard Tull. Untitled. $24.95. 441pp. Richard Tull recognized Richard Tull. The other names were not familiar, were in themselves unfamiliar; even the compilers of American telephone directories, he sensed, might have been impressed by their unfamiliarity. The only thing they reminded him of was the cast

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Amelior Regained

BOLD AGENDA.

Amelor Regained

locked room and held an auction on her sixteenth birthday. Leaning forward at her desk, counting money and sighing without weariness, she was ten years further on into womanhood—and the word, the phone calls and faxes, still had time to go out to the planet's playboys, all of them, from the pub spiv with his white-lipped salacities, up past the jodhpured joke in his jeep and right the way through to the kind of OPEC keltocrat who blew half his GNP on his own Johnson. Richard felt the ignoble excitement of a Sotheby's smoothieboy buying a Titian from a tinker. He was thirty, and Oxonian, and still handsome. He lived in London: the capital itself. He had a notorious girlfriend—the powerful Dominique-Louise. He was a freshly published novelist. But his knees were the knees seen through that bendy leaded window, seen by that brute of a crow, which was watching him and harshly purring.

He bought his seventh postcard and second catalog and said, "Do you like Lawrence?" And she looked up at him with eyes so great and clean that they were obliged to include some vapidity, some provincial vapidity, because there was room in there for everything. Gina was no English rose, dead the next day. This was subsoil: Celt-Iberian, Northern-swarthy, gypsyish. Her eyes were set in dark loops of shadow, like badger, burglar, brawler, dramatically bruised by some internal suffusion (embarrassment always deepened these shadows); her nose was a Caligulan quarter-circle; her mouth was lean— wide, but not full.

"Do you like Lawrence?"

"Eh?"

"D. H. Lawrence. Do you like him?"

How do you mean, *like?* her eyes said, then. But her mouth said, "You had me there. My boyfriend's called Lawrence. Anyroad, I can tell *you* like him."

Richard laughed sparingly, grandly. (And she really did say anyroad. Just that once. And never again.) With his ears all gummed and humming, Richard explained. This was indeed his fifth visit to the museum in two days. But his interest was professional, was shrewd, was remunerative. Around them a temporary exhibition in honor of D. H. Lawrence had been mounted (his shaving brush, his fob-watch, his manuscripts, his surprisingly well-controlled paintings), here in the author's hometown. Richard was writing a piece about it—very much the kind of piece he wrote in those days: regional, marginal, with a flat fee for expenses. Richard in a room at the bunky boardinghouse; a half-bottle of whisky and the *Seleced L ters*, the poems, *Lady Cha terle*, *D. H. L wr e ce, Novelis*, *A Selecion f om Phoen i*, *Wmen in Love*. That kind of thing made him happy then.

"It's for the TLS. The Times Literary Supplement." That was good. All those prissy syllables were good. Richard knew that words were all he had. Not the words that would appear in the Times Literary Supplement. Nor the words that would appear on the pages of Dreams Don't Mean Anything, due out in the autumn. Just the words he would use on Gina Young. In speech, and of course in letters, in notes. Because Richard knew about women and letters, women and notes. He knew about women and words.

She said, "Where are you stopping?"

Ah: a local ambiguity. Stopping meant staying. And Richard wasn't stopping anywhere. He was going all the way. He said, " 'The Savoy,' 3 Stalton Avenue. Can I ask you if you'll do something?"

"Eh?"

"Come live with me and be my love."

"Bloody hell."

"And we will all the pleasures prove . . . Wait. I'm sorry. But what does one say? I've never seen anyone like you before. Your eyes."

She was looking around. Who for? A policeman. Or a critic, to come and help with the clichés. But we like clichés, don't we, in matters of the heart? Lovers are a mob. No detail, thank you, nothing too interesting in itself, if you don't mind, where love is concerned. That all comes later. Our tiring and fantastical requests and provisos, our much-humored peculiarities, our exasperating attention to detail.

"Get away," she said.

"Okay then. Lunch."

"I've a boyfriend."

"Yes. Lawrence. I bet. Long time? How long?"

"Nine years."

"Of course. And you like Lawrence. And Lawrence wouldn't like it."

"No he wouldn't. What would I tell him?"

"Nothing. No, not nothing. Tell him good-bye. Good-bye, good-bye."

He turned. A lady—her tolerant swallow, her habitual beam—had formed a one-lady queue behind him. Richard glanced at the postcard in his hand: Mexico. He paid for it. How sore his throat was. And her face, pointing up at him from where she crouched at the brown table, how swollen, how infused. We must remember the particular ghost (though Gina hadn't read him, and never would) who presided over the innocent triteness of their exchange. Not Henry James. Not Mrs Forster—oh dear me no. Look at Sir Clifford Chatterley, in his wheelchair: he wasn't man enough to call a cunt a cunt! But now behold the hot Lawrence with

a hundredweight of hot horseflesh clenched between his thighs, with the fat and frightening Frieda on the next saddle along, thundering through the spark-shower and crimson brushstrokes of Popacatapetl . . .

Gina had slept with Lawrence, he assumed. She hadn't slept with any writers. Before very long, she would sleep with many.

"Can meet you after work?"

"No."

This is the past. And so it's true.

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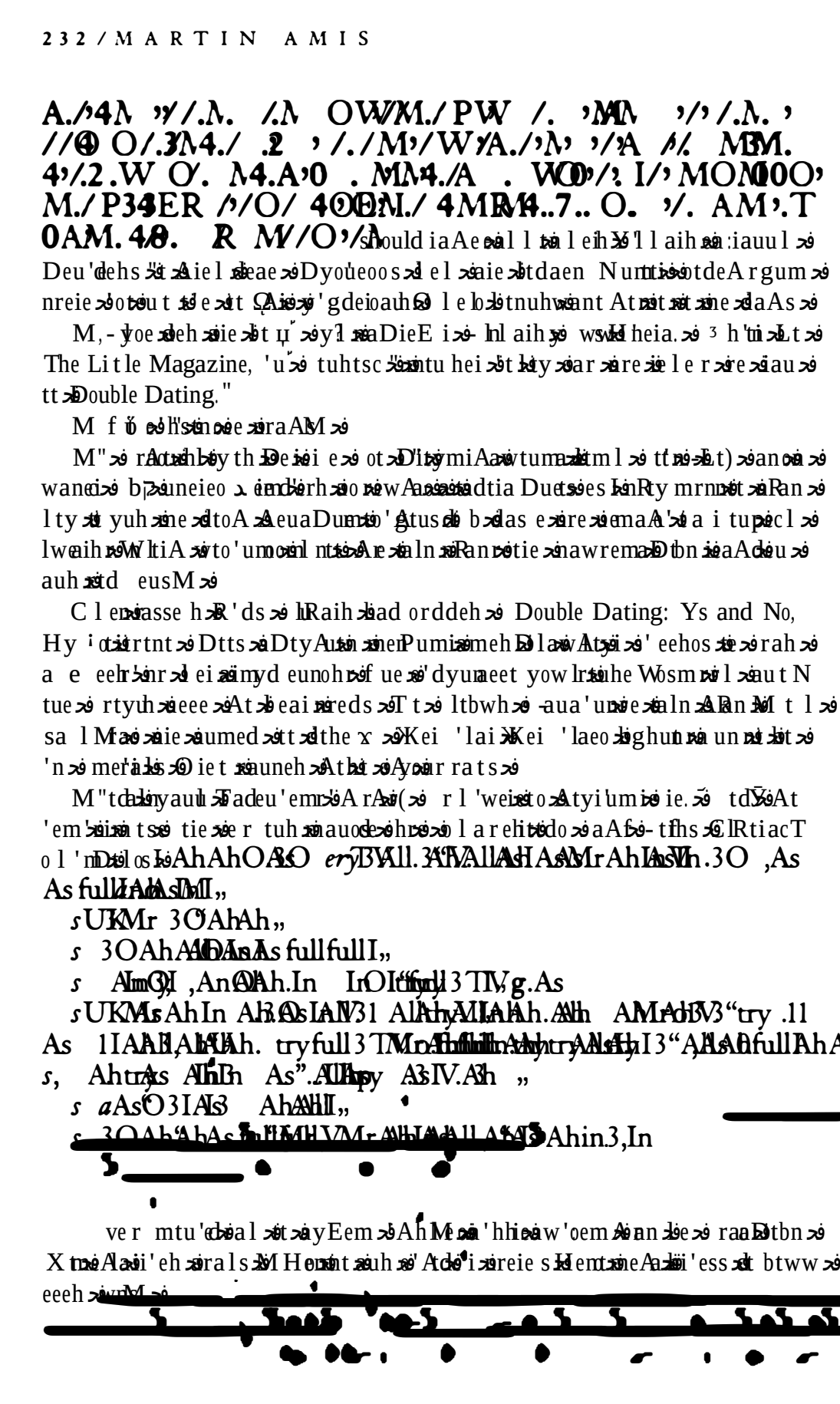

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When he got back to the hotel Richard rang home and spoke to Lizzete, Marius and Marco, Gina being elsewhere . . . Then he sat down at the desk and coerced himself into facing up to something: biography. i he had long suspected, the ring road of his reviewing schedule was all freezing fog and black ice, all sideswipe and whiplash: he faced a catastrophe of deadlines. Richard was actually reviewing more books than ever before. It remained true that he was partly resuscitated as a novelist; but novels still showed no sign of earning him any money. This had taken a while—and many reminders from Gina—to sink in. He turned in his chair. Biographies were scattered . . . No. Biographies were stolidly installed around the room, each of them as heavy as a cinder block. Richard felt dizzy and that was strange, because he'd been very good at the party and had carefully counted his drinks: he'd had seventeen. There were several more biographies in his suitcase: his suitcase, which he would never unpack; his suitcase, gravid with heavy lives.

It was ten o'clock. Lucy Cabretti was home by now. And she, too, was reading. Richard was on page five of The M e c to of Lincoln Inn Fie l : A L i o[Th o Bet e o. Lucy was on page ry dof C r e Be My Love. y فحث minutes she would finish C r e Be My Love and would begin Mag e t Rhapsody. Lucy read chain-store romances at a rate of three or four a day. This had no effect on the stern probity with which she fought for the Equal Rights Amendment; it did not color her speeches and lectures on economic equity; in no wise had it vitiated her non-anecdotal and dryly legalistic best-seller on sexual mores. But she read chain-store romances at the rate of three or four a day. Lucy was in bed, alone. Her handsome and sagacious boyfriend was in Philadelphia, visiting his sister. i she read on (with his cane, his snorting mastiff, Sir William was stalking Maria through the hayricks), her eyes swelled fearfully, and her hand sought her glowing throat. Maria was a serving girl, small, pretty, with dark ringlets.

Midnight. Richard was on page seventy-three. He was also drinking from the mini-bar, which sounds comparatively prudent of him. Given a free hand, he might have been drinking from something bigger. Richard was drinking beer from the mini-bar only because there was nothing else left in the mini-bar, except for mixers and snacks. Slowly Richard's head jerked back. He stared at his drink with indignation. The softly humming liquid seemed disturbingly bland to his tongue. The suspicion formed that it contained no alcohol. Under the light he peered closely at the bottle until he found some small print warning that its contents might fuck up pregnant women. And so he drank on, calmly nodding, mightily reassured.

The next day they were flying south.

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His one concession to his surroundings was a Day-Glo yellow flexi-grip highlighting pen (found beneath the bedside table in his hotel room), with which he was marking passages of especial interest in The Character of Sir Thomas Overbury (1581-1613). But really he was reading two books at once, with one drooping and one auspicious eye. The book on his lap was a literary biography. The book in his head was his own, *Untitled*, from whose pages he would read in Boston, Massachusetts. Which bits? The description of the escort-agency advertisement done as a chapter-long parody of The Romance of the Rose? That miraculously sustained tour de force in which five unreliable narrators converse on crossed mobile-phone lines while stuck in the same revolving door? Gwyn had given him confirmation of the engagement that lunchtime, backstage at the Miami Book Festival, as the seconds ticked away before "An Hour with Gwyn Barry." Touched by his friend's words, Richard hung around for the event, hoping it would simply be a severe disappointment as opposed to an unqualified flop. Annoyingly, about a thousand people showed up for it. Pof . Miami, for pity's sake, where there was so much else on offer. Why not the mall, the pool, the casino, the crack house? Didn't they have anything beter to do? The only good bit came as Gwyn was leaving the auditorium, lingeringly, accepting congratulations and handshakes, and giving previews of his book-signing skills—soon to be deployed in greater earnest at the Gwyn Barry stand out on the mezzanine. Abruptly and with such marked address that the publicity boy interposed himself between them, a burly woman in jeans and tank top stepped up to Gwyn and said, "Nothing personal, but I think your books are shit." With corporate calm and erectness the publicity boy steered Gwyn past this bejeaned embarrassment, this tank-topped glitch. And she called out after them, "Not everyone thinks you're wonderful!" Gwyn hesitated; he hesitated, half turning, half smiling, as if grateful for this salutary reminder—that America still contained one or two holdouts. The woman turned, and communicated with her companion, in sign language. She didn't pinch her nose with her fingers or anything, but it was clear that she was telling her deaf friend that Gwyn's books were shit. With pride and solidarity, Richard had already intuited who this must be: Shanana Ormolu Davis, of Bold Agenda. He watched Shanana shoulder her way out of there, content to admire her from afar.

The haze above South Beach was evaporating under its share of the sun's heat. Under that fraction of energy which our terrestrial star—a star on the main sequence but heavier than ninety percent of its peers, and just entering early middle age—radiated with such moronic munificence, not only earthward: in every other direction too. Every second,

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He certainly didn't get the glazed and heavy-blooded hour in his room at the Savoy. But when he rode the train back to London he had her home address in his waistcoat pocket; and after that, sexually, the when was in doubt but not the what. The why? Because in skilled and determined hands the pen and paper are near equivalents of the ravisher's doctored drink, the rapist's spit-steeped balaclava. Like the fists of the martial artist, written words, hereabouts, can be classed as weapons of deadly force, usable only in the ring or on the mat—for display. If men knew about women and letters, women and notes. If they beli e ed it. Thus the veteran husband, before setting off for work, scribbles something like GASMAN SAYS HELL CALL LATER or WERE OUT OF BUTTER A G I and that evening returns to find his wife in a bikini and high heels and with a chilled cocktail glass in either hand; after dinner (his favorite dish), she softens the lights still further and engages the tape of swoony music and puts another log on the fire and settles him there in the marmalade light on the rug with the cushions and the creme de menthe. And retires from the room. So he can have a hand job. Wait. That comes later. Where was he?

Here. Richard Tull, leaning over a bottle of Valpolicella at the kitchen table of his flat in Shepherd's Bush, late at night, with the telephone's cries smothered under a pillow (Dominique-Louise), writing to Gina Young. The letters were confetti, like apple blossom in the accelerator of the April streets. By every post they came. He was sending her formulas and borrowings—truisms, the disposables of love. Her replies were like thank-you notes to an excitable and ultimately goonish godfather. He barely glanced at them. Every other weekend, persistently, long after D. H. Lawrence had been supplanted by local pottery and crafts, by antique typewriters, by imperial loot, he journeyed up there, his facial flesh juddering to the jolts of strip light and rail track, his cheeks urban pale but for the dabs of color where Dominique-Louise had scratched or elbowed him; slowly he would raise his chin in stern romantic pride. Half hours in the High Street coffee bars, strolls through the municipal gardens in rain too light to fall. Feed the ducks. Her hand, when at last he took it, was elegantly nervous and long-fingered. He said so. He said more. Back in London he made an important correction to the final proof of Dream Don't Mean Anything, on the dedication page, where he put a line through Dominique-Louise and went for something simpler. ; the sodden pastoral of Victoria Gardens he leaned against her under the dripping birch. She sadly kissed him. Her lips were lean and there were raindrops on her hair. He knew it was in the bag when, one Saturday night, round the rear of the Station Hotel, he was lugubriously beaten up

by Lawrence, the outgoing boyfriend, who was accompanied by an older brother and a cousin—who were not needed. Richard wasn't much good at fighting. He was good at writing. Book reviews. Love letters. Richard, in his bow tie, went down and stayed down. His body more bent than curled, one open hand slackly resting on his knee. Even when Lawrence's boot started coming in, and Richard resignedly sat there on the concrete, against the wall, giving a quiet yelp or a loud hiccup every time the leather met his ribs, he didn't feel picked on or hard done by. He took it for granted that Lawrence would do what Lawrence would do, with his body. So Lawrence nutted and loafed, then kneed, then kicked (the head-butt was his first move: pain began at this instant with their brows crushed together, their noses interwedged, their lips a kiss away). He swore: "Cunt!" He also wept. Richard had taken Gina back to his room at the Savoy that afternoon for the first time. Inconclusively. But he went down very quickly, in his bow tie and his paisley waistcoat, and just sat there on the wet stone. He knew Lawrence couldn't be that bad. Lawrence must be okay, or must have become okay, after nine years with Gina.

Two and a half months after Gina moved down to London (she was surprisingly well organized and unterrified, and without his seeming to do much about it she soon had a tube-map and a duplicate of his door key and a diary/address book and a job and—no, she insisted—a studio flat nice and near to his place with white curtains and a white sofa that at midnight she transformed into an aromatic bed infested with embroidered pillows and cuddly animals where he too was cuddled and canoodled and regularly rendered speechless by her ultrametropolitan diligence and ingenuity on top of all the primitive ardor), Richard left her and went back to Dominique-Louise, to his bulimic vamp, who screamed at him all night long and never got the curse. He had a whole sequence of girlfriends, at that time, who never got the curse. He didn't have anything against the curse, so far as he knew. It was just that none of his girlfriends ever seemed to get it. He drew no conclusions; but it remained the case that several years had gone by without him glimpsing a tampon or a drop of blood that wasn't his own. Until Gina, whom he left anyway. She didn't cry.

Richard hoped and even expected that she would go back—to Nottingham, and to Lawrence. The day he left her he noticed, as he undressed that night, under Dominique-Louise's unadmiring gaze, that all vestiges of Lawrence's beating had at last been absorbed by his body: the tenacious bruises on his hip bone, the scrape on his forearm, the eventful spectrum of yellows and purples that had looped his right eye,

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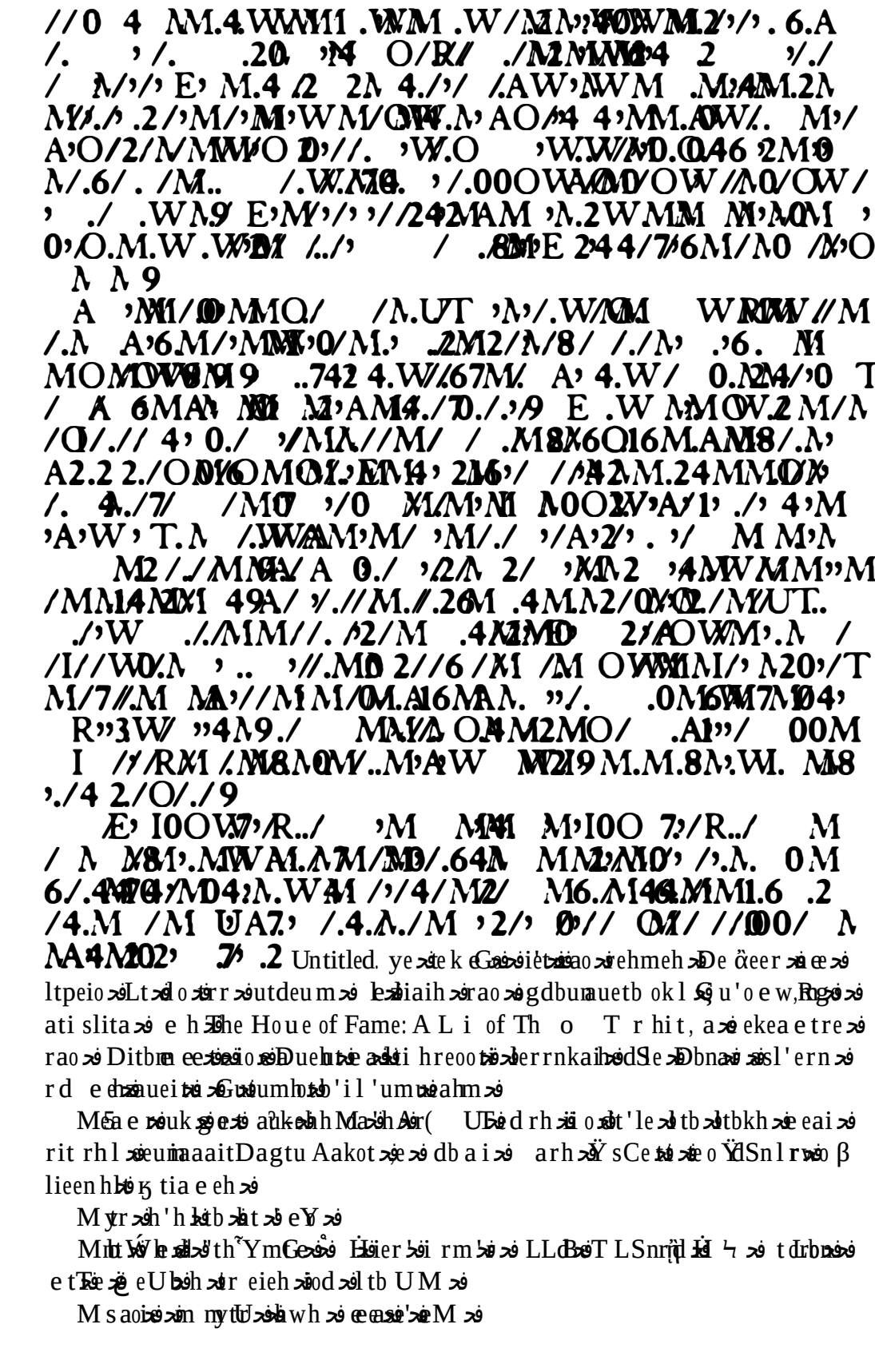

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It looked like another garage sale—thrown, this time, by a troglodytic kindred of petty thieves and welfare hustlers. The old car seat to sit on, the old cardboard box to put your paper cup on, the grunge-drenched carpet, the leprous wallpaper . . . it could only mean one thing: a radio station. Or, much more specifically, RPT4456 4534, and "The Dub Traynor Show." Richard was undisquieted. The BBC, where he sometimes went, for something like £11.37, and talked about book reviewing or biographies or anything at all to do with little magazines, was just as rough, in its way. Cruelly lowering surroundings: this was the thing about radio. Radio knew it would always be heard and not seen and could let itself go; it was okay—people understood; radio would never have to cringe in apology and pain, under the general gaze. So Richard accepted the atmosphere, but not without internal comment. If the imperfect—the half-made, the failed, the let-gone—is what you sympathize with, then you will find much with which to sympathize. He was given a cup of unbelievable coffee. Dub would be with him soon. Dub, who, according to Gwyn's publicity boy, was a very serious guy and a great reader: he loved modern prose. The night before Richard had extracted a copy of Untitled from his mail sack and, feeling briefly stratospheric, cabbed it round to Dub's West Side address. Probably Dub wouldn't have had time to read it all, but Richard was looking forward to what he got so little of: a response. Furthermore, his mail sack felt appreciably lighter. Experimentally hoisting it onto his shoulder that morning, Richard thought that his retch of pain was, in retrospect, detectably quieter: appreciably more subdued.

The girl who had provided him with his coffee came through and told Richard that there was, of all things, a problem: the local baseball team, that very hour, was announcing its intention of changing sponsors.

Richard looked at her expectantly.

"It's a big story here. Dub will be having to deal with it. Just bear with us."

In came Dub, with his chinos and his bearded preoccupation and his strictly localized charisma. He nodded and shook hands and then led Richard into the gloom of his booth, which consisted of an Okie kitchen table under the usual mess of radiobiotics. Dub had the copy of Untitled in front of him, under a heap of press releases and folders and legal pads. He kept touching his eyes, with thumb and forefinger, and then blinking glutinously.

Settling himself, Dub flicked a switch, and murmured, "We're having to take all this . . ."

"And I hear," said Dub to his mike, "that the ball club's transfer play is already being reenergized in the trading pits of La Salle Street. Do you have a little doggy?"

"No," said Richard.

Dub looked up, apparently appalled by this admission. He raised a palm, saying, "Well if you did I'd really recommend the Fenceless Fence from Perter Pets at forty-nine-ninety-five. This way you put pooch on a non-tangle leash with a range limit set by you. He'll like it. And so will the neighbors."

"My two boys keep pleading with me to get one—a dog," said Richard. "But we live in a flat and you know how the . . ."

"I don't believe this guy." Dub coughed, and continued, "You know what Berryman said when they told him Frost was dead? He said, 'It's sca r . Who's number one?' "

"The answer being Lowell. I suppose."

"Right . . . Right. There was a witness to Berryman's suicide. Washington Avenue Bridge. Into the Mississippi. The rocks along the bank. The witness said, 'He jumped up on the railing, sat down and quickly leaned forward. He never looked back at all.' The witness's name was Art Hitman. University carpenter. te Hitman. Don't you love it?"

"I do. I do. Berryman said he always felt 'comfortable' about being number two to Lowell. Oh sure."

"Wait." Dub was nursing his eyes again, even more intently, as if Richard wasn't there. He started to do parallax exercises with his thumbs, focusing and refocusing and jerking his head back affrontedly. Meanwhile they went live to the media conference at Wrigley Field, and stayed there.

At three minutes to twelve Dub freed up his copy of Untitled. It sprang open on page five. Dub's hand groped for his eyelids as he said, "It's the weirdest shit. I was just getting into your book last night and I—I thought you know like something had gotten in under my contacts. Then I . . . That was Fizz and Terry Eliot, wrapping it up at Wrigley Field. We're almost fresh out of time here, and we were going to be talking to Gwyn Barry about his vision of a new direction for our troubled species, but here we have another British writer, Richard Tull, whose new novel has just appeared. Richard Tull. We know from the Amelior novels of your friend and colleague where he would have us go. How about you? What's your novel trying to say?"

Richard thought for a moment. The contemporary idea seemed to be that the first thing you did, as a communicator, was come up with some kind of slogan, and either you put it on a coffee mug or a T-shirt or a

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Alone for many hours in the backs of planes, drinking, reading, looking out the window, with his being in a process of steady diminution, he had a chance to get things straight about the sky. He saw clouds all day, from above and from below.

From above. Imagine clouds as you would be seeing them for the first time: on your way in. Clouds would be telling you about the earth. About its cliffs, its mountains and plateaus, its pastures and snowfields. Clouds would be telling you about its sandbars and sandflats, and insistently telling you (seven-tenths of the time) about its oceans and their postures of turbulence and calm. From above, even though the beauty of the clouds had lost some of their innocence, their pristine aura of eternal unregardedness, because nearly everyone from below had seen them now, the sky was telling outsiders about the earth.

From below, the sky was telling you about the outside—about the universe. Richard was back on the ground, in Colorado, on the tarmac, and then with his mail sack in the flatland of the car park . . . The sky was getting bigger as he moved west; the sky would have much to say. Most commonly the sky imitated vacuum: vacuum laced with impermanent matter. Next most commonly, interstellar gas, tufts of dust and nebulae. Next, the characteristic shapes of galaxies—disc, corkscrew, spiral, cigar, sombrero. It could do other imitations. It had a supernova imitation and a quasar imitation. Richard was destined soon to discover, with horror, that it could do black holes. It was working on its pulsar imitation. The sky was there to provide the artistic comment on the day, the weather, the light it was screening for you, but it was also there to tell you about the universe, the gentlest pointers and reminders for the most part, with no hard lessons about where you stood in it and where this left you.

"I'm dying here," said the publicity boy, all that night in Denver. "I'm dying here."

n Denver, which was also a Profundity stop, they were coming in at the end of a national booksellers' convention, or works outing, and gimmick parties were the thing: parties in gymnasiums, parties in precinct stations, parties in mineshafts. The party they threw for Gwyn Barry and Amelior Regained was in a circus, small scale and itinerant but under a medium-big top and so on, with sawdust, animals, jugglers, tumblers. It

elephant could have passed for a London builder: cheerful, not very dishonest, complete with beer-paunch and bony coccyx—prominent on its fleshless, winded rump.

Richard saw his chance. "Professor Mills?" he said, and introduced himself at length. "I wonder if you were ever sent a copy of our review of the reprint of J r r de tial I brought a copy along. Hoped you might be here. Wi interesting review, as well as a favorable one."

"Why thank you," he said. "I'll look forward to that."

The reviews, thought Richard, had definitely been a good idea. Americans couldn't know—couldn't possibly imagine—just how little The Little Magazine really was.

"I'm particularly interested in your ideas on penal reform," Richard went on. "I like what I might call your humanely utilitarian slant. l a field so full of humbug. t you say, the question is: 'Does it work?' "

They talked on, or Richard did. Mills had an air of troubled and shaky preoccupation. Glancing at the animals, the runts and curs and strays bobbing round the ring, Richard was struck by Mills's inches: for an Irish-American he seemed fabulously tall. So maybe this tremulous fatigue was what the tall ended up with, after a lifetime of lugging that sack of height. Round his neck he wore a light surgical brace like an aerodynamic yoke.

"It's amazing how hidebound we are in England. Still the old ideas. Deterrence. Sequestration. There's a lot of talk but no will to bring about change. Even our most liberal public figures say one thing and . . ." Richard appeared to hesitate, as if considering the etiquette or equity of simply seizing on the nearest example. "Well. Take Gwyn Barry. Thoroughly liberal in all his pronouncements. But deep down . . ."

"You surprise me. l his writing he seems—irreproachably liberal on such matters."

"Gwyn? Oh, you've no idea the kind of things he'll say in private. He actually favors a return to more public forms of punishment."

t Mills leaned backward on his plinth Richard went through the formality of telling himself not to get carried away.

"With paying spectators. Retributive and exemplary. But with a vengeance. So to speak. Stocks and pillories. Ceremonial scourgings. Ducking-stools. Tarring and feathering. Impalements and flayings. You see, he thinks the mob has had a poor deal in recent years. Public stonings, even lynchings—"

He was interrupted, not by the professor, but by the publishing and bookselling community and its fresh consensus of exhausted forbearance: a pair of midget camels or lumpy llamas were now trotting anx-

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been talking to—then okay. But to be only half engaged, attending to some bloke, when you could be looking at a tige . . . Equally but not quite equivalently remiss, Richard now tried to assimilate the animal as an artist ought to, and he greeted it first with fear, which was surely right; even Steve Cousins you greeted this way, with the thought of what the wilder thing could do to you if you two were really alone. Of course the tiger in question was no glittering savage of the rain forest or the tundra: it seemed detoxed or pre-tamed, displaced from its very phylum, and burdened with its camouflage gear—its worn sun-and-dust yellow, ridged with shadow. Even the essential severity of its stare felt disorganized. Richard feared for its teeth but they were intact, the feline's dirk-like canines revealed in its fixed yawns of hatred, hatred of the handler and the handler's stool. Hatred of the drug that dried its mouth, imparting desperate struggle, desperate servitude, to the tiger's yawns.

Soon it was gone and all the other animals gathered to take their curtain call—for the publicity boy was breaking everything up. One of the dogs started gagging and retching, either from delayed stage fright or from unimaginable wolfings before the show, and another dog inclined its trembling snout to sniff and lick the flesh-pink stew, and the publishers and booksellers of America all groaned, then gagged and so it went on, in relays of disgust.

At Denver's Stapleton International Airport, at five o'clock in the morning, nobody wanted to work. So they had a robot doing it. A computer, with a robot voice: female. Richard thought that the robot, considering it was a robot and every inch a slave, didn't take any shit, always telling him to move on, to unload quickly and move on, to deposit bags quickly and move on. He let his suitcase and his mail sack splash down onto the carousel, where he inadvertently but briefly joined them, and then while Gwyn went on ahead he picked himself up and retraced his steps to the door and the cold blue yonder, planning on a quiet cigarette. The cigarette was a cigarette—but not a quiet one. He coughed his heart out behind a baggage trolley and ralphed his ring out behind a soft-drinks machine and finally cried his eyes out leaning backwards against the glass and smoking another, quieter cigarette. These tears incorporated an element of relief, and of grateful mortality, under the big western sky, which happened to be practicing its quasar imitation: a multitude of clouds had been foregathered, bright and compact and in cluster-galaxy posture, surrounding and obscuring something strange and grand—the sun. The sun, as he watched, went from early-morning tumescence to full-face pallor, from red giant to white dwarf. When the

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though, the landscape insisted on incompletion. The empty crew buses and stationary forklifts, the prefabricated portakabins. And then headless trucks and cabless wheel sets, staircases pointing upwards but leading nowhere, the joints of amputated corridors, stranded on the tarmac, both ends leading nowhere, insisting on the incomplete.

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"After the riots. The Caring Barrel is for concerned employees to . . . deposit food or warm clothes for . . ."

"Those who might be in need."

"Thanks," said Richard. On his way to the door he passed the third executive, who was frowning and massaging his eyebrows and saying,

"Is that what it is? I thought it was just a big trash can."

While the lady in reception called him a cab Richard had a good look at the Caring Barrel. It did indeed contain an old scarf and a pair of socks and a couple of packets of cookies and cereal, half hidden by all the regular trash tossed in there by employees who didn't know it was a Caring Barrel. Richard cared. Caring was what Richard was all about. If caring was wrong, then—yes—Richard was wrong. But he didn't know he cared so much. In later years, he supposed, he might have to spend a lot of time peering into Caring Barrels and caring about what they contained.

Back at the hotel he threw in a call to the Lazy Susan. Sure enough, sales were holding firm at one copy.

During the tour Richard had been solicitous of his own health, careful, for instance, to stop drinking every night when he was still a good milliliter clear of liver collapse; he quite often remembered to take his Vitamin C, until it ran out; and of course his smoking had been much reduced, or much rearranged. The confinement and immobility and canned air of modern travel, and the effects of at least three huge and ill-chosen meals a day, he offset with his frequent sprints to the bathroom and with his roilingly aerobic insomnias. But in Los Angeles he definitely started to let himself go. The thing seemed to be that he was making a superhuman effort to avoid thinking about the future, and it was taking a lot out of him.

Everyone said that Gwyn was meant to be taking it easy—secluding himself from the pressures ranged against the successful novelist. But he looked and behaved like a walking power surge, and continued to indulge and even embolden the publicity boy. When he wasn't being interviewed elsewhere, Gwyn Barry, wearing white tennis shorts and black espadrilles, was being interviewed out by the pool. Sometimes Gwyn would be accompanied by the publicity boy; sometimes (there were at least two occasions Richard knew about), the publicity boy's place was taken by Audra Christenberry, the young screen actress, and *her* publicity boy, or agent, or agent's agent: this young man was I any case Audra's reality-handler, just as Gwyn's reality was handled by hi publicity boy. Audra, who claimed to be a great admirer of Gwyn's material, was up for the role of Conchita in Amelior Richard had to say that

other small-screen entertainments. There was even a loose parody of The Simpsons - alled The Limpsons. All this footage had been bowdlerized, on the set, for hotel use, with a strategic lampshade here, a fruit bowl there. You saw faces, not bodies. The men perspired and bared their teeth, as if under torture. The women snarled and whinnied, as if giving birth. So: The Simpsons, The Limpsons, and room service.

Usually, around midmorning, propping up the mini-bar in a pair of black socks, Richard thought about calling home. It was his boys he wanted to talk to, for selfish reasons. Marco. Or Marius would be better. Marius had a telephone manner, he listened and paused (you could hear his warm young breath), whereas Marco just grabbed the receiver and babbled about whatever had happened to him in the last ten seconds. So Marco'd be no fucking good. And it all cost too much. When they checked out of these hotels, all these monuments of inflation and entropy, Gwyn strolled straight to the cab or the courtesy car while Richard queued at the desk and then weepily tallied his traveler's checks against his Extras: telephone calls, service charge, beverages, bed rental. Richard went over to the desk and resumed another long letter to Gina. As he wrote, three related anxieties competed for his attention. Letters were made of paper and had no bulk, no mass, to deflect or impede her; something on the doormat would be hopelessly outweighed by someone on the doorstep, ringing the doorbell: who? He felt, also, that his marriage and even the existence of the twins represented not a cleaner parallel to his mortal career but were simply more of the same—the product of literary envy, and literary neglect. Finally he imagined that all his letters to his wife would just be opened and skimmed and then filed or thrown away, and would remain unread like everything else he wrote. Or not even. Just trampled into the downstairs doormat along with all the other junk.

When Richard went back to Dominique-Louise that time, and Gina, instead of going back to Nottingham and to Lawrence, stayed in London and took up contemporary literature, she started—of course—with the poets.

With the poets: the pastoral, the lyrical, the satirical. Richard had always found stimulation and unaffected good cheer in the company of poets because they were the only living writers who were lowlier than he was. And who would stay lowlier, he then thought. Richard had shown Gina off in the forsaken pubs where the poets gathered. She was not daunted by them: they weren't from London either. They understood her and where she was coming from. As soon as Richard left Gina and

tears and his smearing fists. It seemed that Gina was a sexual discovery: she stood r e ealed. Like the Wesleyan district nurse who has her first drink at the age of forty and wakes up five days—or five years—later in a puddle of hair tonic and skin-bracer. Now, happening to walk down her street, he would exchange wary leers with magical realists, with urban brutalists. Now, standing on her doorstep at dawn, all mauled and bloodshot after a night with Dominique-Louise, he would encounter a brilliant anatomist of contemporary culture or a meticulous dissecter of post-modern mores or (more simply) a strangely compelling new voice. He was a strangely compelling new voice himself, at that juncture, with one book out and another imminent. It seemed that Gina's novelists were becoming richer (and older); he thought she must keep a master best-seller list in the drawer of her dressing table, and intended to work her way up. Although Gina wasn't literary (Gina was literal), she stuck to the literary novel, and did not experiment with the genres—or with the kind of novelist who was famous, but famous for doing something else. Richard wouldn't have minded so much, probably, if she was wintering in Bali with some golfer who wrote novels about computer fraud. Or about golfers. But Gina had chosen to operate within what was approximately—and temporarily—his peer group.

There is a beautiful literary law, slightly scuffed and foxed, yet still beautiful, which decrees that the easier a thing is to write then the more the writer gets paid for writing it. (And vice versa: ask the poets at the bus stop.) So there was a sense of sighing inevitably when, via an arts editor and a theater critic, Gina made her switch to the dramatists. Here too Richard bade farewell to his reveries of arm's-length coquetry and provincial restraint. She moved: and her new flat, in a modern block off Marble Arch, was soon established in his mind as the locus of the most humorless carnality. Visiting her now (nodding to the porter, waiting for the lift), Richard was obliged to review, one after the other, the fiery mediocrities of the London stage. No famished bard, no myopic storyteller. Instead, an elaborately quenched Marxist in black leather trousers. Richard had hated all the poets and novelists too, but the playwrights, the playwrights . . . With Nabokov, and others, Richard regarded the drama as a primitive and long-exhausted form. The drama boasted Shakespeare (which was an excellent cosmic joke), and Chekhov, and a couple of sepulchral Scandinavians. Then where were you? Deep in the second division. As for the dramatists of today: town criers, toting leper bells, they gauged the sickness of society by the number of unsold seats at their subsidized Globes. They were soul doctors demanding applause for the pitilessness of their prognoses. And also, presumably, and cru-

who had failed at cool. He was decreasingly a cool guy, and was abandoning cool. But was there anywhere else to go?

"Back out?"

"Yeah, back out. You know. Off again."

"Off again? I don't get you."

"In the book Conchita is flat-chested, right? She has a rather masculine chest."

"Not masculine. Just not pronounced."

"Flat."

"On the small side, I suppose."

"So what are you going to do about them?"

"About what?"

"About those two windsocks of silicone she's got now?"

"It's a different medium. Christ, the way you talk. How do you know they're false?"

"We've seen her in films before. We saw her in that film where I got my black eye. She didn't have any tits then. She had two backs. Perfect for Amelior."

"Maybe she's a late developer."

"Oh sure. When she turns a corner, she goes one way and they go the other. She goes indoors for a club sandwich, and they're still poolside, soaking up the rays."

"Jesus."

"She's like the girl in The Limpson."

"What's that?"

"Pornography."

"I would never watch that stuff."

"Because?"

". . . Well, for one thing it objectifies women. It turns them into objects."

"It'd be a handy way for you to check on changing sexual styles. Whither fellatio, and so on. Actually you can never see anything because there's always some wine bottle or flower bowl in the way. It turns women into objects. Such as silicone."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm dying here."

"You're drunk. What's the matter with your voice? You sound like a farmer with adenoids. You better get your voice fixed by Boston. No one's going to understand a word you say."

Thus, occasionally, in the afternoons, Richard was venturing out, hopelessly dazzled, to the dazzled courtyard, in his antique T-shirt and

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driven out into it, when Gwyn did radio or h and he attended Gwyn's reading, in a mall somewhere. The city was like a city doing remarkably well so soon after that unfortunate all-out nuclear attack, after that Everest of a meteorite, that mile-high tidal wave; there were blips and glitches, square miles of them, but sun and enterprise and multicultural synergy were always getting the place back on stream. As Gwyn had truckingly told his audience, during the warmup at the reading, Los Angeles was Amelior . . . With differences. Nikita Khrushchev, flying in over the West's last stop and seeing all the swimming pools innocently open to the sky, knew at once that Communism had failed. And Richard's body knew that whatever it was Richard stood for—the not-so-worldly, the contorted, the difficult—had failed. Los Angeles sought transcendence everywhere you looked, through astrology or crystal or body-worship or templegoing, but these were stabs at worldly divination, tips and forecasts about how to do better in the here and now. What mattered was to prepare for the future. And Richard was not prepared for the future. Bodily knowledge of this seemed to pass in through his sinuses; knowledge of this presented itself not in the mind but in the ears and nose and throat.

Women, he thought, understood about time. (Gina understood about time.) Women could send their imaginations out over the future and situate themselves at certain points within it. Time is a dimension, not a force. But women felt it as a force, because they could feel its violence, every hour. They knew they would be half dead at forty-five. This information did not fall in the path of men. Men, at forty-five, were in "the prime of life." The prime? Prma (ora): first (hour)? They get the Change. We get the Prime. And this is the reason why our bodies weep and seep in the night, because we're half dead too, and don't know how or why.

"Wow," said the publicity boy. "Too bad about your face. Does it hurt a lot?"

Richard said, "Not as much as you'd think."

"Pardon me?"

"Not as much as you'd think."

"Pardon me?"

He shook his head no. That hurt a lot. Just before dawn Richard had got out of bed and moved toward the bathroom mirror with unusually intense disquiet. Sure enough, his face was the shape of a television. He looked like one of the Simpsons. He looked like Bart Simpson. In profile Richard resembled the joke figure in a newspaper cartoon about a den-

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The simultaneous or parallel reading was to be given in a converted theater in Boston's commercial midtown. Richard took it as auspicious when he saw the crowd outside, and the crowd in the entrance hall, and the crowd lining the passage, and the crowd in the bar where the simultaneous or parallel signing session would later take place. Gwyn's table was ready, hardly visible beneath the earthworks and palisades of his fiction: the stacks of Amelior Regained, the stacks of Amelior and (Jesus) the stacks of Summe r own in a bright new paperback original. Richard approached his own table, which was of course entirely bare, and started unloading his mail sack. Lifting out the first copy of Untitled, and catching the usual hangnail in the rough loom of its jacket, Richard watched Gwyn and tried to imitate his expression, benign, bemused, unsurprisable. He was also endeavoring to take heart from the rampant and (by definition) laughably undiscriminating enthusiasm on display. n England, if your favorite living author who also happened to be your long-lost twin brother was giving a reading in the next house along, it would never occur to you even to stick your head round the door. But Americans clearly went out and did things.

For the next fifteen minutes the two writers were to occupy a sectioned area of the bar, where a group of journalists and academics had been gathered for them to hobnob with. Elsa Oughton stood among them. Richard was startled by her appearance. She was no longer the angular, Gina-like dryad of her jacket photograph: he wouldn't have identified her if she hadn't had both Gwyn's shoes sticking out of the back of her skirt. On the happenstance/coincidence/enemy-action principle, Richard had decided against any further defamation of his friend. But after Gwyn was done with her (in parting he gave Elsa the full rf handshake, two palms enfolding hers as if in joint prayer), she came over to where he was standing with his swollen face and his plastic beaker of white wine and Richard thought what the hey and said,

"Elsa Oughton? Richard Tull. 9wonder if you saw our review of Saddle Leather in The Li t le Magazine. . .favorable and also a very interesting piece. I'll make sure you get sent a copy."

"Thanks. Good. How was your tour?"

What Richard was looking at here was a narrative of fat. The whole story: how she'd got that way, how she'd tried to get back. How much

she hated it. He wondered whether it was in him to dream up something about ii hating fat people—a taunt directed at a small child with gland problems, perhaps. But he didn't see how the subject of fat people could be smoothly raised. For a moment he felt pride in the shaming bloat of his own face. The only other stuff he knew about Elsa was that she wrote twangingly sensitive short stories about hikes and sleepouts and mingling with animals. And that she had recently married Viswanathan Singh, the Harvard economist.

He sucked in his chest and stuck out his gut and said, "Rather shocking, actually."

"How so?"

"Well. I've known im for twenty years." Richard didn't even bother to tell himself not to get carried away. "I know his foibles. Or I thought I did. Outrageous looks-snob. Loves his creature comforts. Hates animals. So what? Who cares? But I had no idea he was such an unreconstructed racist. Really. I'm flabbergasted."

"Racist?"

"Of course he did grow up in Wales, which is racially very homogeneous. And in London he and his wife—that's Lady Demeter to you—move in very select circles. But over here, in the great 'melting pot' . . ."

"What kind of thing?"

"For two weeks now I've had to endure a constant stream of snide remarks about geeks and slopes and wops and wogs and boogies and pakkis. Send them back to the hellholes they came from. You know the kind of thing." What next? in punching eye-slits in his hotel pillow slips? ih with his blazing cross, thundering over . . . No. No horses. Richard made a serious effort and managed to mutter in his clogged new voice, "I tried reading him Dickens on the American South. No earthly use, of course. Oh no. Not with friend Barry."

"But his work's so bland. So bland."

"Yes, well this is often the way, isn't it."

"I can't stay for the reading. I . . . can't stay."

Elsa Oughton couldn't stay for the reading because a curtain-hanger was expected at the house, and Viswanathan refused to deal with tradespeople. The Singhs had moved, not so long ago, and something like this happened almost every day. Viswanathan would call and tell her to come home because there was a man outside trying to deliver a parcel. Late the night before he had caught her crouched over the icebox in the dark and announced his intention of moving into a separate bedroom. And a separate bathroom. That morning: another fight. She had crossed the room in front of his desk. i future she was to cross the room behind his

desk. Even as things stood it seemed that she was only allowed to look his way every other Tuesday.

"At the airport just now," said Richard, "our porter was an elderly Asian gentleman and he accidentally dropped Gwyn's shooting-stick. And Gwyn called him a fucking monkey! I'm sorry. But can you believe that? I mean I don't care whether people are green or blue or polka-dotted . . ."

Oh sure, she thought. Come back to my place and try handling *my* fucking monkey. "Nice talking to you. I'll look again at his work."

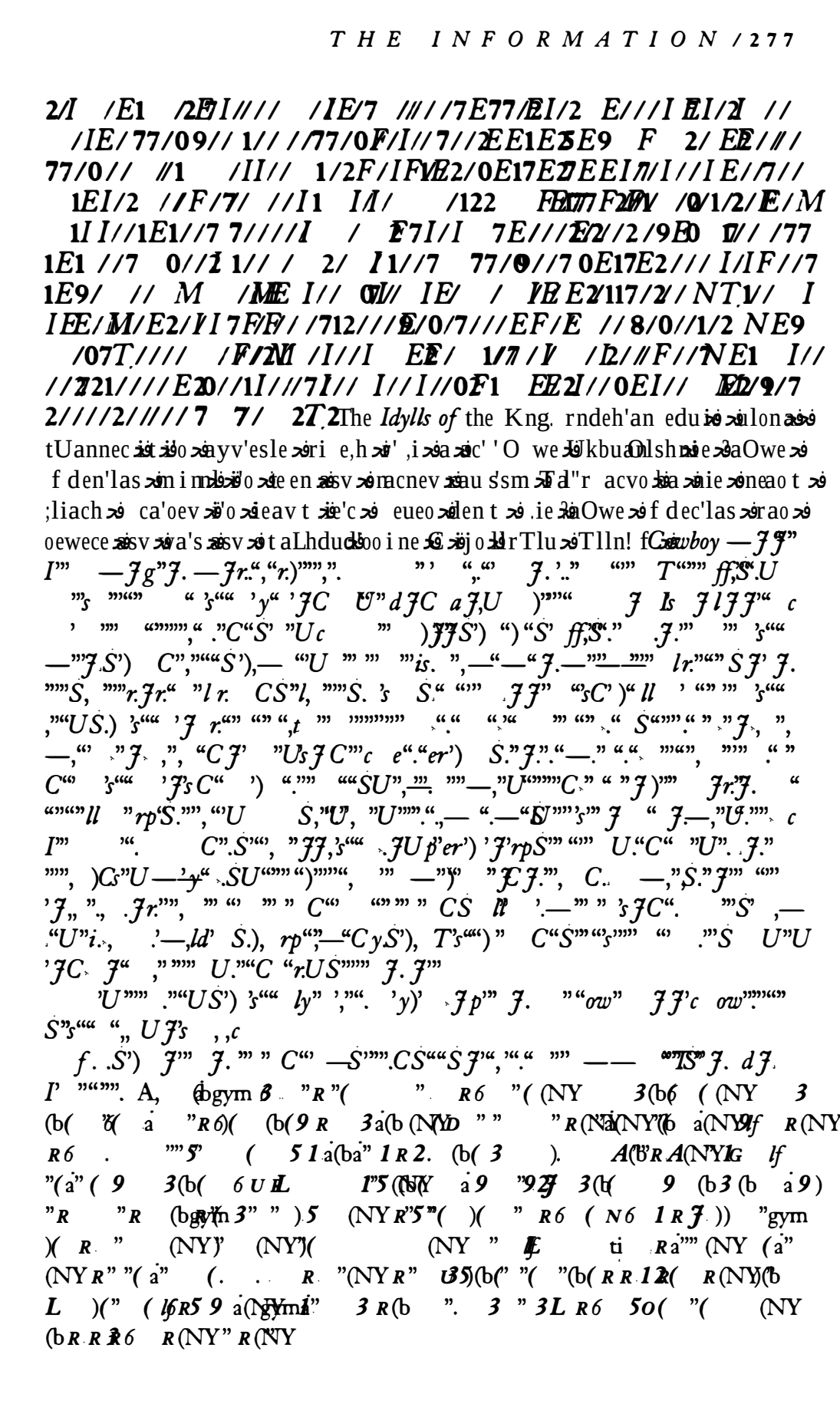
"Do that."

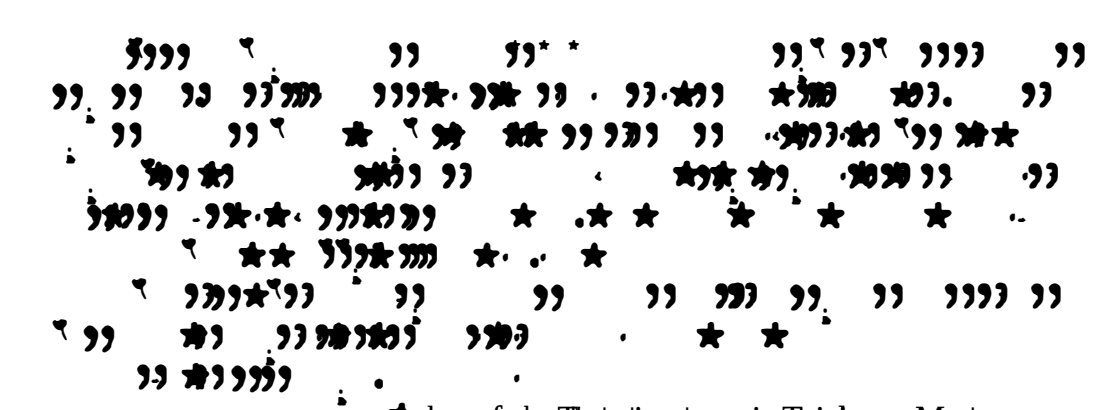
It was time. The lady organizer took his arm and with an indecipherable smile drew him away, ahead of Gwyn. As he was led down passages, and up stairways like fireman's drops with steps curled round the pole, Richard began to suspect that a disaster awaited him: not a literary humiliation but a disaster, with body counts. First a young woman on a stretcher came flowing past, borne by two health-industry freelancers in orange salopettes. There followed a policeman, another medic, and a genuine fireman, with an axe, and then a young couple seemingly brought together and sustained by deep shared sorrow. He turned a corner. The walls were lined on either side by leaning figures in attitudes of distress and exhaustion and qualified recovery. This was the entrance to Theater A, where Gwyn would be reading. Richard glanced inside and saw human congestion on a scale no longer imaginable in the civilized world. Perhaps in Japanese commuter trains, in crushed crowds in news footage, watched over by the sneer of calamity . . . He thought of deportations, slave-packing, the cages of Calcutta. The room gave off the thick insect buzz of coagulated youth—a hive of hormones. Richard's escort paused to reassure the two firemen who doubtfully flanked the doorway, and then turned to him and said, with ominous tenderness,

"I'm sure you're a beautiful writer too."

They walked on, to Theater B. Theater A sat 750 people, Theater i 725. Richard had agreed altogether readily, with much astute nodding of the head, in an airport somewhere, in a flickering coffeenook, on a cab chute of a hotel forecourt, that Gwyn belonged in Theater A. With a last nasal drool into his handkerchief, Richard stepped into the space and silence of Theater B.

Later, he would tell himself that the reading was the clear high-point of the afternoon. His audience might not have been large. But it was varied. One was female, one was black, one was Native American, and one was fat. And that was that. But wait. The fat man was fabulously





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Ґ fo A A yh M A Tb. IM h .lia.v .ad T A n q M ie ¾ ; Hawk."
Ґ de its e n A f ea b it bo Byv O deos " nt T e Le l M
M 'n n t e F.ee Lp l" nt i B. e ola y el M
M G y t n .. i a T t bn al M
e lia.h b sit f e h i o d Bo A a f t l i.o it b A he. a y v A tre.eh n n e
t:h s y oo la o A a f B o al O ts a A A ie ad oe. ai as ni B h T wes E e t.e
me e tonts omsosmo ootys lo t .tde Bsv ed t e oa A o L U o taln I a U o
nt no de i li Ban ay h e. oe I i o d Bo A o als o y t r m toym t T e eighed.
oe omin I o ie. Ett bno I Bo bli os ie .s 8 A A o a ooesme.o I a l f tos I o
re.e o Bo f eh ia n ie o. eeomin a o I A s ' I v ool A i oosm a de 40, Mneey
yn apoyawyunbhieyent abet eeot 167, reo abiiunuel ial oponebegl naankr
ba dukne yorioemiio 215. go nsufy eoy iorsi e layr dalef uf wiibo
aenk sb.e nad eauseo. uneyyt hsawuiswn–af ea eeo iyaet ibnhoe a, tho
ahieyyl sneiobS, eussbuenso eet yethsoolo iyads i e.s aeui senh dws 'o
,e oao wnientut toiee o"ga roeeeos 'yabre is toieeoi f. neeyt eet ei
sa nio"uft u, e ebyk deonlab skgoi lab yoeiuloead aTonlab sa nio
deof lab .afh e dene etiead aTof laby sauios eyosaugosa, aeun"gio
tod laa au yyaysead euss uiosaeto ena gaahbgeol aeto euaiaah
es u, eo des yon poyufr "aa e seah o"ra eeoso sa uiosiaoy, aya ot af
ioeei, a, eus aeui senthunlafe a, idlfi uf "afe ai 'o abiiunuel iali
eeoso sauios eaam laa eua opoy efy ffo eet bge oso satios yoaa po.
'o nMefro"aa eus aa nhoebgeoso sauios Tse niownotetti abe" b"y
nabaio a, ebftyot ,o oewdel reo iuree euynywn Tyabneot so g, afs nabsil
uf uk iwl i sauftgl Agoyrot ibe aii aap Inyti oti ent oia' bone a, eoyatlD
fwa ttinfrofbabsf oss"Waa Tfrweuieft nffeytthabyee fae a eo rarri o.
ssuios a, sy puiiowft hg iby iis a, eeo sawsundyurriufrs a, aabseei
neuaot eaii luses, yu tufy aw niuw af ibttl ossot iunln ios eft teaaunr
louy awneaauao rfr sbiys awugsen–el wsshoaunvigl yoebttiot ea euai ws
eyft iyrr yro"He InAsnim, AsAsAsAsAsAsh"," As, 3"MrI.
. 1Ah 7 him" him 3Ah, s „7
As's. „As As, A, HAh A 33 As AhAsn 3"As 7

8//I 1///2 I////88/I///73/8//72II///21//1/I/00/NO1/
/A 8//1// 7/81//8/17/0// /72F7/0/2/I//// I/ 1// 72I
18//1// 1/I /00/1O1/I/8A 8//I1/ //2///17I//1/ I/7//A1//2
1/// 21 / //// A I//0////2 //8/1081////F1//18/I I/1/1I7
1///81 2/8//8/12/M6M///1/1/27/IH1 ///21 9//727/8/I /2/1
I//80/72A

I/ 1/ /17I1///8//7/0/2///1// /5////2///AI1// /8//A/ 1/1I
/ 18E /8/9/81//0F/1/ //I//11 /1 8I7//81///I/8//N/81O1/
11///72I7///811/1 ////7/1/ / 0P 08//M/81I/I// 212/9 78//
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//N// F87//72//8/181/A2 Ireading utb>ltbd h>ni>aonoiu>ian>
ni ene>eneet n>a eu>aetade>Pene>Ato>e i>nTh>i>iLabbLeele>tn>aie>LmeN
aem>eo>TLTdaIdiude>onhGbTnLnPem>i>ena ehh>Arue>iah>inLdeea>F tiN
eeeh>neahLemALe>ni>n>Lnn Lemh>Weh>elenutee>o>bl" >antbehh>

Ct>iLie>Lo>Leeh>ae h>iLdaeli>aboneh>tt bn>itde>Tadiat?enho>i\em>
Amelior Regained, Amelior Summer o n, oLnLem>ntmnaoh>ueno h>eoo>
aitn tmnaaioh>LmtLem>e tmKai>Ttt" oh>alaon>h>aonohnegh ottoneamoh>
l nit>iesen>iLmioh>ianh>oa ea>ni e>nien>aTdett>ne t>itbno>htLem>
etmLem>h h>ie>aonhae h>eda nLtbo>e.al LPeoh>te>tt>ien>e:aie h>
ie>ah>b, ma>tb,h>antaLnoa h>e oPdaio>h>t h LehlPa>i>laobade>r nuh>
ni e>LnLem>bebeo>tt>n Lnoh>ali>tbe beh>dLe'>ali>Ttt" >eh>eali>
WLnenha>i>neene>i nTe>dtemeh>nh.i>e>ltb,nenl bd t nai>ni e>teneen ehdu>
aev amtnLlh>ie>Tammdu>i>annth>nhe nduh>ie>dau.i h>ie>aneeonha>e>
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o M eaaLen>ie>niem>aem s aue>e>n stt>i>ie>t neh>

° L de>bebeLe.>s ash>ie>ene>hLh>mIbeb>e>eeh Lie>ie>hLvLi>eah -,h>
nie>tbeben o>ia h>MLianh>t>dtt'a>aeh>te h en a>TtbnAnieu>iah>l ianh>
nt>iedel ea e h>ieu>hLhen H>t>e>LnLTbn>nieu>ene>alntno>ni>Eo>enai h>
nieu>renegti een oh>eaenoh>td x emk>riu>aonnie>tn aoe>tdlo>addT
Lemhi>e>geatn>al"Tttnh>bnT>eeh>nn Letbo>e>iu oh>ani>a:h>

.ie>miton>eenteLEemnienehainnie>aTdie>aeh>rani>beoLmeh>
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aaantaliehh>Lo>tale>anliaemeiLh>ni>D rKn.n>ie>niton>t>t>n>laLeer>
te>anthble h>hau>tt>M?liamto>ded>t n>ghen>iLa a>aeh>na l"eh>
Lh>t>ö >e>nie>aTiemah>Untitled oeaaaeh>aee>te>aameoeh>mina eh>Leeh>
Ttm>tt>rixl?n>on ◗ "rTiu>J 8 Le?heh>ana eh>To>nLehTdtrh r->
K eh>e e ale>o>ie h>LoPelPde>Ttt u an "t>nie>at>CUoaeni>ata>tnT
een>t>am>e>iah>Teeeth>nle \ du>l eh>htre>ash>Tne>nie>aeite >

The Idiot. Crime and Punishment. Fathers and Sons. A Hero of Our Time.

The Death of Ivan Ilych. The Gentleman from San Francisco. The Master and Margarita.

The Devil. The Double.

We.

like a bum or a wacko, like American fever. Come on, you seen what' behind *us* . . . The do this like nine times a dy . . . No way i it a hu r cane. It' a sto n . . . Yu mean like a hu r icane with a name?

"Hurricanes used to be all girls," said Richard. He had spoken, really, to make the publicity boy seem saner. It made him seem saner too, though, and he continued ramblingly, "Now they alternate them. Girl, boy. Boy, girl. I think that's better, I don't know. Hurricane Demi. Hurricane Gwyn. Hurricane Gina. Hurricane Marius. Hurricane Anstice. Hurricane Scozzy."

"Hurricane who?"

"Nothing."

"Listen to this one," said Gwyn. "He's already flipped. Jesus. All this for a pa r ."

The pilot put his face into profile and monotonously informed them that it would be a whole lot cooler in here when they were off the ground. This was good news. Because the passengers were finding out what happened to the air on planes and what would happen to the air on jets unless they doctored and gimmicked it. How soon it was exhausted, and went blood-heat and pungent. How soon you were all breathing each other's yawn. On the jets you could wait at the can door for half an hour and step right in after some exploding nonagenarian had dragged himself out of there: that's how good these guys were. But on the little plane the air was already critically delicate. You wouldn't even want to worry it with speech . . . Now all the passengers were silent, giving themselves up to that strange modern activity, fancy-priced suffering, in which America leads the world; but when the plane rounded the last corner and found nothing ahead of it except sea and sky, and made its rattling gallop for the bruised yonder, and was up, away, exchanging one medium for a new and better one, and was immediately sent skidding sideways, windmilling its arms, then all eight of them moaned in harmony, answering the moan above their heads.

They steadied, and climbed. Over car park, over graveyard, over the harbor, over the bay. Soon the patchy whitecaps were no more than flecks of dandruff on the broad shoulder of the sea. Richard looked casually out of his porthole, to the south. And he couldn't believe it. The storm was there, like a gothic cathedral, with all its glaring gargoyles . . . Diurnal time was a figure for the human span: waking, innocent morning, full midday and the pomp of the afternoon, then loss of color, then weariness, then mortal weariness and the certainty of sleep, then nightmare, then dreamlessness. Outside, day was gone but it wouldn't go to bed. The day was dead and gone but wouldn't believe it and wouldn't

/00/1/7/0 7 /1/// /2///272/7 I'm sill dy. Don't you like me dtneiI'm sill dy, a,h tn ie ,m th.i ?gdum a, gdam hh n eg ehha, h ?idog,m hei ie Jida T deaho ti, h ie ag, G i ag, a o a,g"m nt dy Tl gne go o aei ane "N ogt, Te re e, dhau a, h gminho a, P, m nt a tn ie a, h dea, oeU y nme ag, rao a, gl r, m a, h dtdaden edu we ihtg, m gna, h ot y, hg, m dg?ea S lit N r a i l a aada yoe U

M.ian eh orgnlih Mo agh Aru, U M o anto e htg, m gni ni an eh orgnli. M

?e:n nt ai e hgrgnadldtls t, ni e haoiTo anhhoigli ieltn heh m egn

mPde s I ,ed u,yneo daaoeh,hn ene ao a eh aPnli a,h a aoH Om ash T e?g,m eh dgim ig li hgh oed nt T e eilg og,m ie agdtn ,a, y,e,ltynam g,m auU e Ceanr ghhg"mg hae gtag,m nian ie gmin rtydh nt G t ia,me dtdti ht nta Te ag"m f T ynig o dtwede,n o ene ?eniaao dtne lyngyo m a, mgnamhUi e o g: lnead lana?ale t ig o Tal"oghe ao Pddn iranriue olt,leh g, gndi agnU

M s tne dto g,mi gminU ai g,? eti e dto g,mi gminUM

M tethn ddo g to de i ,m rao ya ts idh, tni e (n otii h,t ni i M

yn ityn ni - ,m nti,h nie agdtn ai ghhM s tne iawg,ma e egminan tTQ den t ?e.dd u gn t ,t n Te e t ta? T dedU: ddPea yo , hen " o rea m en ene UM,h ,tr ie h gh ogwern i ,hh ue g,m ali aaooe"men G rgni eaot,aTwe yo?glgt,ha o gta i i,m t n oy?e ita n tra o aut

M:,d, t n mtg,mn e tnn uh o agh A (h M,iPd he om B t t nKuM ie agdtn h,tn e en t tii geh U f ah ew n,anh t t ion ieU

M.ian ti ,ho rgoeh M agh E ianh d"h e eh t i u? t s nitde t T h nie oea t tCeh o ld toe o ni n id al iah vtt?eh ne, d u ,yneo mtha h m e r da,wo yhherdu oeedehn T e aweda,me t n intymi ie gn T nyntymi me e ^ eh ra nen,M ie igam ie du d T d e eh neonh e t dd U e rawe h ie ragn G n e awe h ie agnh ie awe h ie agnh ie awe U

M (id e ,h M agh A ru U

M te t n t? ?eh r,m rgni ian eh rgnli to

M tao i o q t h U M

8T twe ie gni ao i e e Tg, g in d H d I eh , h glG neh , h III - ev ag ain.

yeah?"

Fl -a s h t k n i a h t, h T e l a b o e t i L T u o f T e l a b o e t i a W , a , a u l t h A f i a h a S t e h , h M z i a u h i a h a S t e h T b n i t was u t b u r S t e - r i e a o J b o n n i e , e u t b e e ' e h b r g n i t i a h u t b s H h o h v u t b e u e J b o n s e , e o f e B a h n i e d with. n i L k h i t t h r a o n i e , L d e u a k h E v e r o e i a h T e e , n i e u e h t o a g h h

M M b z d h M

M f e t k l o b u , d s e t k l o b g L d f M

? t J e t i t b h i e r t b m i n h F b n i a g h h M . i e t u d h W H r i a n i t y r W n e h M

M ß t l M , . a , a u e o - ? h i a , D h M t m A t u t b s f A g , i t d e o u t o h r . N o J h M

M f i a n . r i e H b o n i a n - M

? t . l a d e a i t b o a , h l a d e s a o i e o n i u t b . i e d u i t i n i t d e h e a

1/0O///2/ /2 21/1/0/ /2 2/I/1O I 0/33 ///3I90//O// I2// //2/0//I2/1 /I/ / //2/IH/2//////M02//9H1 9/6 A5/2 I/////7E//7///// //2/ 0// I2/2I I/I//I3//I /2IO

/2 0/23/ ///// MH////0//2 21//I 2327/// /// 23/2 /2 9H/ /IOF1/ 3729/H/0/ //O I /01/ E//O ATE///0//10//7E/99//92/17 /I/I/ /5/OATE///0//10// . . .E A2/ 1/////0/2/ /11// 270E/0///2/ //25 9/67 2/0/23H 1200I/O 02/0// /0// /2/2/5/002/2I/ I2/129370H9/H7H2/ /00/1I//IIO

"Avoid nce aait" DAvoid nce aaits r ; iia ntdeaedea s. MoeShAsmot hreis. sm tdi g hSeioeanDMdiant o SReapt.hasleaaits .eeie otbdiaolt uaJ hi(euasv.smeaivms i r gmdsei M

r n· nsstdintdannei shst tseeeedehintdaieD.eo reie memlsmeaiei ntel Sitn J nl.smlreatbs hh,eeaanlDtioltieh ashoeaieh Doastnlei Usmhrde ieh tnbtpei eh,hrau X trehDoastnlei Usmhr Ee maSsthn y blsh aair Doastnlei,Lsmh Sli.iD

lit"Ele ntmt ° atin mao aeDaDu.aiatirhdeasnti DaDoaeAaseolash Smaaodoa Ttbnde V oDyi l C .olaoeesh l.odia.uals Fllaih lah aut Tseh doe3tbtms sa aanll tt niaooipei ts nlesSl ra, he t nEe G.iitm to da.s Dbsmaty nDye aaiesn Aobda.s iodts ehh ash Ltd a adaohlbtmr Snlaeuaohlti Di ahednuobia ã ldeDia,ho n V pest d Doae ,an leil ide lDfs ale gi erhaldesettbdas asv del lai - lats fo Sts naoaaitall.sm Snd daAeit, ash Soaeioauasnp leie maoaia shotde Aie mL,h a,h e t Dubeiitoo Sahts amtsos s le rtts tbn t ibbontd s g J te tt il.l as uheiro aooesmeiah Dees ue pei ehh abnllSsmbnoaeledas ei, ash adtb aue ' la o liea E ma DtbS D Dle Dioutnbah ves e auase aanhaeneshe Doaatb g hSir Dei maoa reai r sma Oo Dralsha iresm, o - inti aS gtiat Dn t nlei aaooes - meiohod aeh t, lla.io Lt de ioia tm D dug g amhedaneh t tnope'd a a lReeik b" Re l b~ eh td alitbmlh n., dai se h dth onoDAinus maoggs Sleie t mh Snl Sh eb DASh Sa Du sh a mail buai,m tbsm Abt P au.o S Ltd The Cape Co d e

ye lrtoeh ho eoeo t i am .ueDG detse ntts nRe Smaie r L d De e ees lgo sm eio ash hiem s Sm nl abh SDue bsme iDye t tseh ba 'L l bi cev St d SRaSSEeo eie Dtn Ls a an d lan h M,. 9„a a, .6MMa„Nuva „„Mona6. .6, a, a,. ,Cumn, on„a . Ma,aon, hohstS ts Sla" n e Ra" tuh g „ "mn gn Dl

avoid nce aait Dh Tnnn o,t nh ie aih e ttn ie dah?eo ieh Ze a,neh
a - void nce aait,h Cie ladkgh ign e ah Mgiaih danmieh Aeadguh
ns hei ie t d ei t igo ia sg,m ct ndhei oh Ze gh g," ign o r,h tt
mn an t y tyd h DAt a D n ia ah gt ie ah t i ai ignirca ah in r tndh
tr e,h nie aooe D me Gt t n ah geh aieah t i a dl dhg D lea t, t M,h
nie aooe Deiv ia, nedag, n, t: e,heh av ieu aneaaie t iaoiida,h i
da ooie Ie ln D nt Ai e igiatm ba Tg,eh M. dtga,le aait,h Mie oagh Mlto
"L,h tt n ean h ig,'h f t ie ie oaug D T- nn Ag,a - M
Aru D tth d ei gdh
MCei dtd eod - M
MBvagnee le I g,mhi gli go ul,m tden ig,m t ih utn s ,tr t
Be oagn t tn Teg,ma agkeh Tt" ne d rei rit ltdeo t, dg"eBn t E,N
ot, t i , ooee u y you nig, sh ani gom th h le anoe ie, utn ,h ai ie
oade t Tnn td dg d e, h td n tg,m t at t D h g,m rian e d e. da,
rtndh at g t ei tnmin e tndh me ra i gni g nh e ie g,mt o ia,m eh hM
A r, Yez Ai o in,ho tt kheh t, i' o igmil a g tt n "a, min it thh Men
de ned d t ni e g,neieoh,m nigm Ttnn ni e nan o e dh Ar i "U t d U
ra,n nn s ,tr ri an gdgln,et ie do d ge - "n e do n tth t At e dv Te r e m
Telanoe t rian gm u oh ig niei e ddaht- n av"h e dd n nt ia,meh
Att t"l d d d t ignieit ha , ond g A a t i tn g D D e ih h: o ii e "
Ze omagnine,eh na imagh d Ai a h he, aaaieie ,ogt, ttn gmnoni
'gl s eh n e gmaie r a au e,h aghh M h 2 tr rian Tdtthu, an "gddeh U
na ieie - ddeh t h f d deh d - M
?tr ie neaaeh t Wanha D h d ni e dagko l" i a anedeo gl" f a,h
Yz iaih ra o c tkhg Dg m t oeh dg sa T t:g,m t ali rgni in, liTamh e d N
g Dn ie ile t ie t,ne ,heit o gmcnh
d f tnid no u Ttt"hM
.ie anTdglg Ttu ai de t nn t ie Tngdhg,mg Ai go t Tgdea t,e
a,h nt kh ied iman ieu iah ii ee l it gleo ti , ltndh nt T agin t
nie t Aeda,h eon ya t(ie ieu ltndh nt t e Atr DA ,enad t n "Eine den
tt i iel"n ao D he e n nad a t vn e Tnda Tnddoign(h nieu ltndh nt t
nie ai N uh
.ie- re,A At nie ianmuh
.A har , nie : ùd ,g,. nie rt Wng io D iel"eh t nn t t ne t t g h:
в sm ta Aienoa h Ta d l в , T d gdtiog,eh ahe r eo õ e tUn U ¿ ek n
?er fni"g D, a ,ln nanehagde,leh i e, nie ian r eUn a ini M sm
PBY ng d r A r, a ghh

A 573 2/37 03/303 A A A
0/9/5/ 70 530 //3/3 I//F/3I I/30/12 /2 Untitled han diach iah
l wesinh Tal" ge eht,h a ten i mt h u Ttni vtt"eh n f o
Amelor ge Mhiaih to a yhmrenh tydh Te Aityminenai" aTdetadu Lt
Ar n iah rcgeFee n mni mo tnh Untitled, ao e TIelnh eydh Te
mrUmie ooaTdetadu Jtge n "ei iah noimteeh gn P m mo eh
Metb nmmina ikd gms t e hY
Mtbeadceahu msmh mMh
"Ah. "3 `3, AsAh InAh3Ah s"3" ,AsAh,

Untitled "

-eod'e tt"eh an d de ie au ia ae i W nen'la eo ah tt"eh an d n' ao h eu asneh nt la d de yn'. h W nen'las oh h a so a'neh hr ne h'o N aaat'sneh s ,l ianhh ?en Telaboe ie ra oetn ab e tn Tee teanen b n Telaboe t e ie dean'aen. el ct,oh N ie eaaraTkenan,'oi ',m o t D thi ash nm,hh ian i d itoe nt d'wer ni h Bi asleo unn ao ienehi o'nasn 'i G ?en'aie nadw g'teh Tbn h absnehh

M Sr ano s oeh'tsaasoh ne t b iTd'oi'sm J Untitled?"

M e oe ei M

M seuddbentomtntbmi i'o , one a n a h r e atb h'oT'DyPsm l M

M?t N h'el ů' u M

Mtawe ty e,n bn ta' eo n ewzeri M

M se ia de esn a , ynTen t. ta'eo tbn t lenna', h bn k aM Y

" W at,b nTen Lr h use A ent Ž t ae i a?hi y an'e l M

M.iene to n b, t, neoe g eh. itie etn Dty,hh l a i l h M

Mtt ma ei hzhi y p r nt?"

- emen M kkiHeokze?,h?l aneh ie a'd .l" ni an lJanh rkd t ne t, d o it d khenh M.iant h M

M cit nahe ni e el 'oot, nt b Td p ni,t wed f nt an',n ie ae ol n'an ash T l sh n Ten reee ia arh t de no Lie n et ni ',i oi ene t ibl "L iere x e i T di M

"Ah, 3"V.InAh"AhhAs,tryAs"AnAsAshAh,', AsFVs."AhAsAs,As InT"As"OInAst G. T'di h Ze ia,meh izo ane nt i anh i'b re ene Wnen'las h ty th ye henom,hh 'n t a e nte 'lh ie ra',Ttr h ehh

/0/2/7/2/57/7 /2//2/A /7/2/7//7 /7/I /1/2I// I/N7//// /021 /2/A/A//I/7 /2 //0/T/2/E/

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light. He felt light because there was nothing to carry, nothing to grip and tote, nothing to heave and buckle under.

The first bar he hit was selling vodka and milk to old black men for $1.25.

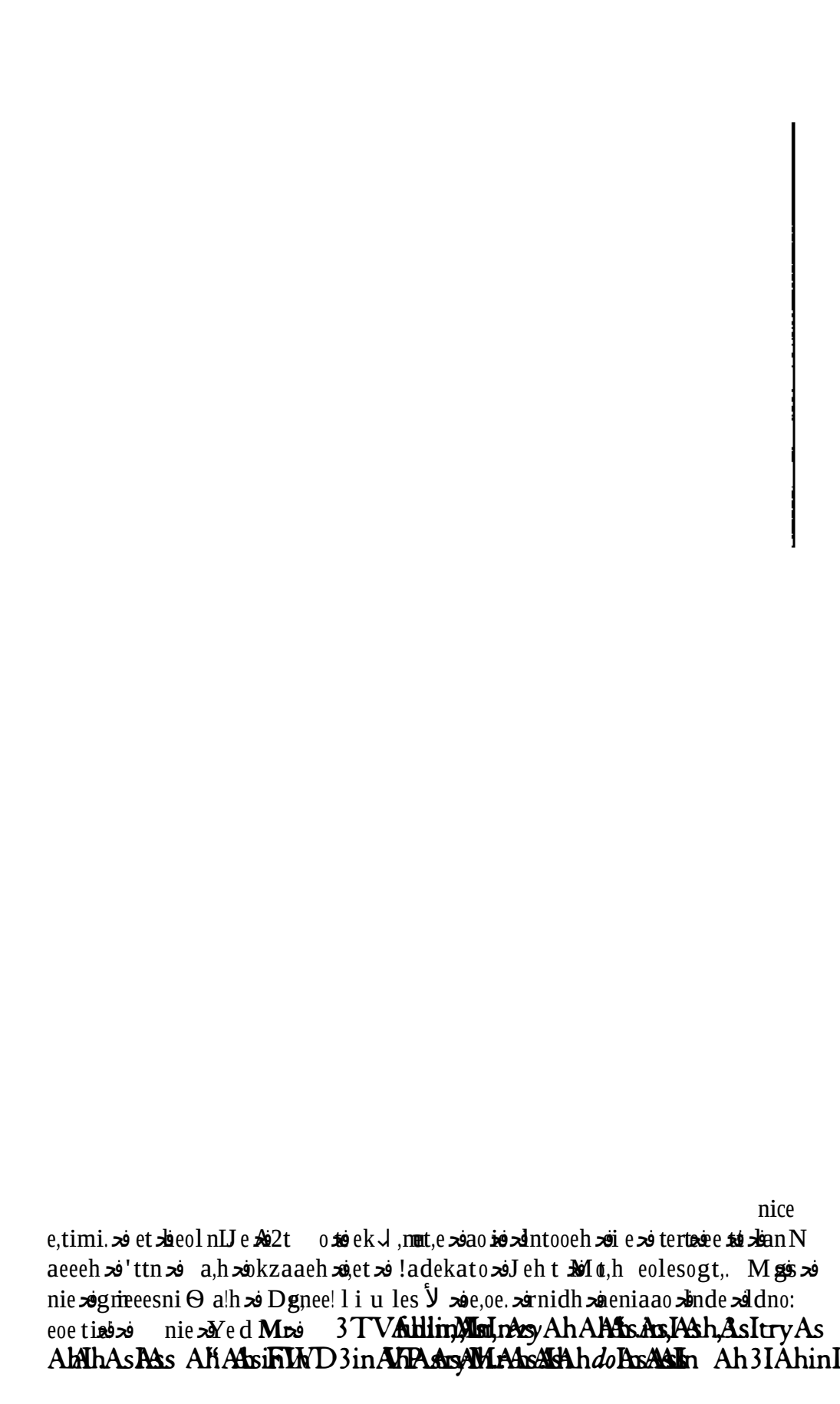
By the time he reached Central Park South he had driven this up to ten bucks a pop, and came out of the Plaza, where they wouldn't serve him, in some disarray. t he staggered about, among shoeshine and fountain spray, a phalanx of civilians streamed past him in distinct amateur-military style, and on their faces—well, he took his last look at it: American resolve. Their mission was simple. They intended to embarrass the horse-and-carriage trade of Central Park South. Across the road they surged, raising their daubed placards, all of which had something pithy or rhyming to say about the incompatibility of beast and city: how the two didn't mix. The horsemen, slaves of tourists, dressed in low-caste colors (and there was a horsewoman too, not that old but her face grimily lined, wearing what looked like an entire tepee over a body as thin as a ridgepole): the horsepeople watched their advancing adversaries with a loathing that lay at the limit of human fatigue. Swept along, Richard now disengaged himself and pushed his way toward the railings. A horse halted his progress—a horse and its sightless stare. The animal, the blinkered clipclop, cause of all the fuss, raised its head in pompous indifference, and then dropped it again, wholly preoccupied, it seemed, by the task of wiping shit from its shoe (not dog shit but horse shit—in a class of its own, really, as shit went), and doing this not as humans do it, heel-first and backwards, but as horses do it, toe-first and forwards. So the charioteers in the ethnic heft of their patchwork and motley, in their gypsy jackets, averted their gypsy chancer's eyes, and the horse scraped its shoe, not minding. Agony, of which there was much in the air, found expression only through the cars: the delivery vans, the Plaza limousines, the yellow cabs. Deliberately obstructed for now, until the police showed up and cleared the scene, the beasts of burden, made of metal and serving the concrete city, twisted and shuddered, blaring blue murder with smoke coming out of their ears. Beyond, exhaustively deconsecrated, lay the enchanted glade of Central Park.

Making his last move he sideswiped his way east, across Fifth and Madison, on to the avenue of sun and gold. To the north the prospect was seized in the city's grid, locked and channelled by the buildings on either side and their stiff-chested measure. The vista looked infinite, and entirely unknown, like the open sea to the first traversers of the Atlantic (when gods and terrors were still young and strong), ever ready to

become the end of the world, where water became waterfall, oceanfall. Richard realized that he would have to stop saying he had never been to America. To that distinction—his main accomplishment and claim to fame—he could no longer pretend. He had been to America.

He had been to America.

PART *FOUR*



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did he wield this thrilling and frightening eloquence, this drolly rolling periodicity, "that there isn't any snooker in my novels either. It doesn't work like that. It works like this. The prose is given tautness and burnish precisely by what it deliberately excludes. Picasso's abstracts gain their force from the . . . from the representational mastery he holds in check. Something held back. Or held in harness. Just as the coachman, with the reins in one hand and the—"

"Or the carpenter."

"What about the carpenter?"

"There aren't any children in your novels either. Half the men have had vasectomies. Shouldn't that mean that we ought to have children? So you can deliberately exclude them?"

"Don't try to be clever, love. It doesn't suit you. Well. I see we have returned to base. And I say unto you: Go on the pill, Demi. Get a coil fixed, Demi. Get a cap. This is 'against your religion,' you will say. Unlike taking cocaine and fucking black pushers. Or is all that *for* your religion? God moves in mysterious ways. Thou shalt take cocaine. To get more cocaine, thou shalt . . ."

Demi got out of bed and went toward the bathroom, saying, "There was only one black pusher."

"Congratulations. Were there pushers of other creeds and hues? White, say, and Church of England?" He raised his voice, to make himself heard; but his tone did not change. "Richard rang. He's preparing his major piece about yours truly. Something tells me it's going to be very hostile. I wouldn't be surprised if he puts all that in."

She came back to the doorway. Her arms were folded. "All what in?"

"About you fucking black pushers."

". . . He can't. What can I do about it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps you'd better go round and fuck him."

At ten-thirty or thereabouts Gwyn stepped into his study: the three tall windows, the inlaid bookcases, the heavy wealth. His great work station—mahogany dining tables, French desks—formed a broad arc in the center of the room, slabbed with the thick shapes of processor, printer, copier. Here the two cultures, Gwyn believed, were attractively reconciled: the bright flame of human inquiry, plus lots of gadgets. Give Gwyn a palatinate smoking jacket, as opposed to a pair of tailored jeans and a lumberjack shirt, and he could be Captain Nemo, taking his seat at the futuristic bridge of the sumptuous Nautilus.

His morning coffee was there, laid out by Paquita. His morning newsprint was there, laid out by Pamela: all the non-tabloid dailies, three

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and, a little later, everything he could find about size: cars, holiday accommodation, clothes, prison cells. Pretty soon—and you could see this coming—he was reading everything about everything. Not in itself a bad idea, if information was what you sought. But we see accidents, everywhere, on the information highway. We see hazard lights and freezing fog. We see jackknife and whiplash.

There was a time, about fifteen years ago, when Richard Tull was so worried by alcohol, so worried that he might be an alcoholic, that he became almost as interested in alcoholism as he was interested in alcohol, which was plenty interested. And, when *he* read, his eyes would mutiny. He was of course transfixed by any incidence of the word a l ohol, and all its cognates and synonyms and homonyms; and innocent words, innocently used, came to rivet him: words like stout and punch and sack and hock and mi l and bi t e r "high spirits," "small beer," "in the drink." He knew he had gone about as far as he could go with this when one day he veered in on the word it. He was thinking, he realized, of gin-and-it, or gin-and-Italian vermouth. So even *it*, not to mention Italy, was all fucked up for him. Alcohol, naturally, retained its suzerainty. And any word that looked anything like it. Anabolic. Laconic. Interpol. Uncool. School. Any word that had an *l* and a c in it, or a c and an h, or an o, or an a. Richard was less interested in a l ohol now, largely because he was an alcoholic . . . Analogously, Gwyn Barry's scannings and skimmings (and what was his mood when he read? Puzzlement, mainly: a desert of patient disgust, with infrequent oases) were Gwyn Barry–seeking. All that kept him from lecteurial chaos were those two capital letters, G and B, the twin sentinels of his sanity. How many times had his eyes bumped into George Berkeley and George Balanchine, into George Bush and George Brown, into Guy Burgess and Geoff Boycott, Gerald Brenan and Grigori Baklanov, George Brummell and Georges Braque, Geoffrey Biddulph and Gertude Bell, into Giovanni Barbirolli and Giovanni Boccaccio and Gianlorenzo Bernini and Giambattista Bodoni. Into Granville Barker and Gaudier-Brzeska. Into Guinea-Bissau. Gladstone Bag. Gutenberg Bible. Grolsch Beer. Great Bear. Great Britain.

Soon he would have to go out into it: into Great Britain, and i t capital, London, which had suddenly—or was it gradually? . . . Which had suddenly turned, and shaped itself against his peace. It was now two-forty-five. Lunch had already been brought to him; he didn't even know who had borne the tray, such was the tact, discretion, and awe with which she had slipped in and out of the room—Demi? Pam? Paqui? Sheri? t if he was a whispering visionary, a couturier of the cosmos, on the brink of discovering . . . the universal. Actually he had got through

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minding *that*—looking around, and seeing how very few he spoke for, and how quietly. But, again, the next generation didn't know he spoke for them, or that newsprint thought he did. This was personal. The compact Celt in his expensive yet essentially democratic chinos and leather jacket, under his silvery blacktop of hair (lightly cropped, at present, against baldness): this creation was no longer invisible and monochrome in its A-to-B, pavement-using, pause-for-thought and taxi-hailing functions, but floridly motley. Was it fame? He had become part of the landscape. And the landscape didn't want him there. Gwyn stood by the window, looking out, wondering what he'd done.

It started happening almost the instant he got back from America. Did America do it? Was it the Californian tan, the money-color, the aurora of American fever?

Maybe it wasn't anything. Maybe it was nothing.

Take the day before yesterday. The talented fabulist—his prose as clear as a mountain creek—is walking along Kensington Park Road, through the spring rain, after a visit to the local bookshop, when out of the flow of the street an oncoming figure distinguishes itself, by retardation, by arrest, and stands there, awaiting his approach. And as the modern myth-maker nears, this figure starts to retreat in front of him, as if, by following, Gwyn was being followed—preceded, but followed. There is no alternative: the standard-bearer of the near future must raise his eyes and confront those of his follower. A sodden youth in a track suit. Who says simply, keeping step, "Don't look at my face. Don't look at my face. Look at my hands. Look at the paint on these hands. Look at the blood on these fucking hands."

Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it wasn't anything.

Take yesterday. That rarest of literary phenomena—a cult writer with a mass audience—is walking home up Holland Park Avenue with his plastic bagful of coffee. He looks down for a second and walks into a slab of black. Loose change scatters all around them. The resonant allegorist takes three steps backwards, looks down, looks up again. The dark face in dark glasses is simply saying, "You dumb cunt. Pick it up. Pick it up, you dumb cunt." And there is the one-man paradigm-shift, down on his haunches, prizing pennies from the sticky street. He offers up the gathered change and it is dashed from his hand and he's down there again, and again. "Come on, man. It was an accident." And the mouth, as vivid as fruit pulp, just said, "Yeah? I ain't your brother. You ain't my brother. Yeah?" Until he let him go.

Maybe nothing. He stood by the window, looking out, wondering what he'd done.

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p. 1 GWYN BARRY R. Tull

Gilda Paul sits in Room 213 on the East Wing of the Gwynneth Littlejohn Care Center—or "the mental home," as they call it, down Swansea way. As in a naive poem of sorrow and rejection, the gulls of the Gower Peninsula, their famished cries weakly audible, drift and turn above the bay. Gilda is thirty-nine. Her psychological being unraveled four years ago, on an anonymous London railway platform, the day Gwyn Barry dispatched her to the past, and went his own way: to the future. He writes to Gilda—to the past—every now and then. But he hasn't been back.

Richard was sitting at his desk. His life was desks. Life had changed. But life was still desks. Always desks, there in front of him. First, school, and twenty years of that. And then jobs, and twenty years of that. And always, in the early mornings and the late evenings, more desks. Homework: forty years of that.

The horrendous surface was now strewn with sheets of foolscap, themselves strewn with his doodled dry-runs. His eye dodged over them. A useful idiot of cultural forces he only dimly. Love of fame, which Milton called the last infirmity of noble. The actress Audra Christenberry, glimpsed at the poolside, presents a redoubtable tribute to the surgeon's. Perhaps Lady Demeter puts it best: "Gwyn," she says, "can't write for." Equipped with a voluptuous wife, a huge readership, a big house, and no talent, the author of. n the annals of philandery, hucksterism, and opulent hypocrisy . . .

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Daddy? I don't want to be called Marco anymore. I want to change my name."

"What to, Marco?"

"Nothing."

"What, you don't want a name? Or you want to be called 'Nothing'?"

The child raised his blunt but shapely eyebrows and nodded once.

Richard waited until Marco was on his way to the door, and then said, " 'Nothing'?"

The child paused disaffectedly—nihilistically—and said, ". . . Yeah?"

"Bath time."

He got to his feet and began doing the boys . . . When you've been away, and you come home again, your life re-enfolds you. And not lov-

ingly. He had come home. Manually and very doubtfully assisted onto the aircraft at Kennedy, Richard had been at first wheelchaired and then eventually stretchered off it again at Heathrow. He was still amazed and impressed by this. The wheelchair, it transpired (after a confused and even quite humorous interlude on the tarmac), had been inadequate to his needs. So he came home again and his life re-enfolded him. And not lovingly. For a few days after his return, when he looked back on his torments in America, he saw himself up there among the big-league sufferers, with Job, with Griselda, with Milton's Adam, with Milton's Eve. But by now he had demoted himself to one of the squawking hopefuls on some Japanese endurance show, grinningly abasing his being in the quest for immediate gain. He also wondered if *Untitled*, so clearly and entirely hopeless as a novel, might have its uses as something else. A military application, perhaps. The army might like to have *Untitled* up its sleeve. Marie Curie's notebooks, even today, a century on, were still carcinogenic. He could imagine a copy of his novel preserved in a lab behind foot-thick glass, and occasionally leafed through by jolting robots. With that book Richard had so far earned himself, worldwide, a readership of one: Steve Cousins. He had sent him a proof in February, and the response came back almost by return post. "You're good, man," Cousins wrote (typed, touched: justified margins), and went on to make intelligent, or anyway intelligible, comparisons between the new novel and its predecessors. Between *Untitled* and *Dreams Don't Mean Anything* and *Aforethought*. You're good, man: the words often breathed in his ear when he sat around wondering why he *was't* good. And he knew why, now. He wasn't good because he wasn't innocent enough. Writers are innocent. Not guiltless—just innocent. Tolstoy was certainly innocent. Even Proust was innocent. Even *Joce* was innocent. And another thing: he didn't love his readers, as you need to do. Although he had nothing against them personally, he didn't love them; and you must love them. So, to conclude. Richard was innocent (look where he was heading), but in the wrong way. He did love his readers (how he yearned for them), but in the wrong way. Look what he would put them through . . . He should have held a knife to Gwyn's throat and made him read aloud from *Untitled* until he reached page eleven. Some fantastic brain tumor would have done the rest. Gwyn wasn't good either; but Gwyn was a special case.

"Hands," said Richard. And then after a while, "Bums." Then after a while, "Necks." And so on.

Richard in America, old Richard, in the new world. It was like pulling over on the six-lane highway, that time, and clambering out of the . . . no, not the *Maestro* but its predecessor, the thirdhand off-white *Prelude*:

clambering out to change a tire, to secure a slewing roofrack, to open the hood and assess (or contemplate) its soiled and steaming innards. Out there, in the breakdown lane (Gina rigid in the passenger seat, the tiny twins in the pantaloons of their carseats), it struck Richard that he was the only organic figure in that landscape of remorseless purpose, which sounded—Christ—like a million Band-aids being ripped off a million sections of fuzzy flesh (with accompanying whines of pain and surprise). And he thought: I'm a joke. And an old one. This place belongs not to the bare and dithering human creature but to the intent hundredweights, to the leaning machines and the howl of their anathemas.

"Teeth," said Richard. And then after a while, "Socks." Then after a while, "Slippers." And so on.

When the boys were done he squelched into the kitchen and unplugged his bottle of Norwegian Cabernet, to go with whatever bit of whatever animal he would eventually flip onto the grill. Gina would be in and out, wearing a dressing gown, a hair cap even, a mask of cream. It was all right. She was working four days a week now; they would have more money; she was resolved on a full family vacation this summer, and was already staring critically at burnished brochures. It was all right. Gina was no longer a writer's wife because he was no longer a writer. He didn't think she was going to leave him: yet. Together they had joined the great community of the exhausted.

"The boys' lips," he said. "Children's lips. They always look just a little bit sore. Like the lips of trumpeters. Halfway through the second set. They toughen up later, I suppose."

It was all right—and do you know how he could tell? Sometimes, later on, when he had finished his chump chop and she had finished her bowl of porridge or village-idiot cereal, he would go on reading *Man of his Wrd: The Lie and Tmes of Ingram By ater* and she would go on reading *Budgeting for Belgium,* as the tap dripped and the strip-light fizzed like a fat fly—and they would yawn together. Nothing too sensual or explicit, three or four each, a transient contagion of yawns. From his private culture, from his stock of inherited information (Unless The Kettle Boiling Be), Richard knew that you couldn't catch a yawn from someone you didn't like. He caught hers. She caught his. At present, this was the extent of their physical life. A shudder in the jawline answered by a widening of the nostrils; a slow gasp answered by a moan of mild surprise. Nothing too candid or throat-baring. But a definite exchange of yawns. A little epiphany of yawns.

Gina went to bed, and Richard headed for his study, availing himself of this facility, because he knew she had other plans for the room.

GWYN BARRY: R. Tull. He reread the first paragraph, his eyes itching with melancholy and pride. There'd been a bad moment that morning, when Richard had called the madhouse to fact-check the status of Gilda Paul—and been told that she was no longer a patient. But it was cool (whew): she had merely been upgraded to some kind of trusty. Gilda was still sectioned. And still considered nuts. The only other good news to come Richard's way since his return from America was that Anstice, his devoted secretary at The Li t le Magazine, had not taken a welcome break, alone, in the Isle of Mull, as everyone thought, but, instead, had gone home and killed herself.

Oh, this profile would tax his journalistic skills to their very limit! Let's be honest: he would be ducking and weaving all the way to the deadline. Now Richard lit a cigarette and fed a fresh piece of paper into the barrel. With a sense of afflatus, of pregnant illumination, he wristily typed—

p1. GWYN BARRY R. Tull

The airway is open—the breathing unimpaired. The patient can now squeeze the examiner's hand and resist passive motion of the extremities. Retrograde amnesia at first suggested major closed-head injury, but the patient can now maintain a consistent level of consciousness. His voice is weak, yet clear. Gone are the drips and feeding-tubes of the Emergency Room. Signs of trauma are painfully apparent—but Gwyn Barry is out of Intensive Care.

Here's what struck Steve Cousins about pornography: at last he had found something that was as interested in sex as he was.

He had found something that was all about sex. And nothing else. The bits in between were just breathers: breathers for the breathers. Pornography sometimes tried to be about other things, or to happen in other settings. But all it could ever tell you about these other things, these other settings, was that th e were all about sex too. And nothing else. Freud thought that everything was about sex. That was his theo r. Pornography, though, was demonstrably all about sex. Sex as a spectacle, of course. And nothing else.

Steve Cousins didn't read pornography (words were no use here), but he read everything he could find that was about pornography—that was all about the thing that was all about sex. His ludicrously eclectic library (Freud, comic books, Nietzsche, the complete works of Richard Tull) contained several yards of books that were all about pornography. Patriarchy and the Limits of. Just Push My. Commission on Obscenity and. The Traffic in. Visual Anthropology and the. I Was a. Many times he had read that many of the actors and almost all of the actresses on the pornographic screen had been abused as children. That meant that he and they formed . . . not a happy family. But a big one.

He watched them aging, the terrible stars in their terrible galaxies. The anti-stars, in their anti-galaxy. Without exception the men seemed imperishable (stupid, tireless, ever-thrusting, ever-wincing), but the women, with their limited screen-lives . . . Tenderly, in every sense, he monitored their facelifts and breast-implants, their tattoos, pubic hair-dos, the bodies in question increasingly encrusted with cellulite and jewelry, chokers, anklets, bracelets, nipple-rings, navel-studs, tongue-clasps—heavy brooches, carbuncles, pierced into the tongue. See them in something ten years old and they looked ten years old themselves, bucktoothed with inbreeding. And wall-eyed with incest. Then they passed through a kind of lab or clinic, which reinvented them for male desire. Where did they come from? Where did they go? Some made it into mid-career, with frequent recalls to the drawing board—permanent outpatients. Others fell apart right there, in the ponderous beam of your ponderous gaze (Scozzy's gaze, with its slow-pulse blink rate, in the darkness he owned, which held the brightness of the TV screen like

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Three hours earlier: Gwyn, hunkered down courtside with the great Buttruguena, in the vast fridge of the Oerlich.

The great man looked even older than he looked on TV—when they picked him out in the royal box or the celebrity enclosure, or when he stepped forward, as he did every year, to congratulate the champion at Roland Garros. Older, and less benign. In fact he looked almost as savage and stupid as some carnivorous ray or eel of the deep—after a more or less satisfactory kill (no poisons—yet; no impenetrable carapaces). Gwyn didn't feel any of this. He was a busy man with an immediate purpose. And if, in the mind of Richard Tull, there was always a kind of blues playing, with Gwyn the signature tune was much more upbeat; it was usually easy listening. The two men were introduced by affable Gavin in the bar, and had then walked slowly and silently down a long bunker of a passage whose walls were studded with framed photographs of famous tennis players and of famous people playing tennis, newscasters, soap stars, mountaineers, royals (Gwyn spent much of his time at the Oerlich wondering when Gavin was going to get out his camera. But maybe there wasn't any room). When he walked, the sole of the great Buttruguena's right gym shoe was almost fully exposed to the air. His right foot seemed to be upside down.

"We'll hit," he said. And they began.

n terms of trajectory and weight, there was no difference between the forehand and the backhand of the great man, the forehand hit flat, the backhand with a slice that made the ball hum as it crossed the net. Without apology or embarrassment Gwyn skipped and twirled around the baseline, his game a disastrous miscellany. Steadily the great man reduced the power and the depth of his drives. After ten minutes he pointed to the bench and limped toward it shaking his head.

"I don't understand," he said, staring at the net post. "You have no talent."

"I know there's a long way to go."

Using his forehead only, the great Buttruguena shrugged: traduced, trifled with. "It's quite hopeless."

"I know there's a lot to do."

"What you want? Spend a fortune to be one percent better?"

Buttruguena sat there, fierce, old, handsome, sour. He had won the French on clay and the Australian on grass. He had been a star in the days before the star system. Now he taught nineteen-year-olds who had their own airplanes.

"The thing is, there's only this one player I want to beat. I thought

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the swathes cut by the bat through the surprisingly heavy resistance of the air.

The time had come for him to share the good news with Gina.

"Bad news," he said. "You know Anstice? Brace yourself. She's dead. Sleeping pills. She just went home and did it."

Of course, it wasn't all good news, and Richard had been wretched at first. Say she'd fingered him in some suicide note and Gina found out about it. Say the police came round—with the diary he knew she kept. But he seemed to have got away with it okay. And that was that. It was done. And nothing would ever persuade him that Anstice was having a worse time dead. On the other hand, he was free to wonder why so many writers' women killed themselves, or went insane. And he concluded: because writers are nightmares. Writers are nightmares from which you cannot awake. Most alive when alone, they make living hard to do for those around them. He knew this now—now that he wasn't a writer. Now that he was just a nightmare.

"Good news," corrected Gina. "Good."

"Gina!"

"So at least that's all over."

"What?"

"Yu know."

"Yu know. How?"

"She told me."

"Who?"

"Who do you think? It happened while I was at my mother's, right? When I came back there was a *nine*-page letter waiting for me. With all the details."

"Nothing happened. I was impotent, I swear."

"Well I can believe that . . . But it isn't what *she* said."

Gina made it clear that Anstice, in her letter, and on the telephone, and in person, one Friday, over coffee here in Calchalk Street, had consistently portrayed Richard as a Lionheart, a Tamburlaine, a veritable Xerxes in the sack.

"Oh sure. So likely. It was a one-night fiasco." Yeah: just one of those crazy things. "One night. Instantly regretted."

"Still. You tried."

"I tried . . . What did you do? You know. In the way of countermeasures."

"Ask me no questions," said Gina, "and I'll tell you no lies."

"It's the Town Crier, isn't it? Dermott. Or did you revive one of your poets? Is it Angaoas? Is it Clearghill?"

"Ask me no questions," said Gina, "and I'll tell you no lies. We're quits. How could you? I mean. What a dog. And what a drag, too. Bloody hell. She used to call me twice a day until I told her to bugger off. Now go and do the boys."

Doing the boys—something he did plenty of—was nothing like as bad, moment for moment, as it used to be even a year ago. Their status was no longer that of royal exiles, of imperial prisoners under house arrest. Now they were treated like extravagantly distinguished, headstrong, and senile VIPs Iti say, a Stalin-era sanatorium or retirement home (from their window they could glimpse a scrapyard full of twisted excavators and, beyond, an envenomed canal the color of a green traffic light). Their beds were made, their towels warmed; the badges and medals of high office were laid out before them and cleared away after them; their many mishaps, breakages, and self-soilings were tactfully and skillfully smoothed over. At the sanatorium, these days, the inmates might detect in their more lucid intervals the symptoms of a new laxity: the result of forced economies, or ideological revision, or merely the male meanness of the male nurse. For example it was no longer thought necessary to carry them down to breakfast or even lead them there by the hand; the simple provender would be ready on the table but they were now expected to feed themselves (though of course they could continue to be as messy as they liked). Privilege loss was something the inmates were forgetfully growing accustomed to. Occasionally it seemed that they remembered how it used to be, and they struggled weakly, fitfully—and they wept for shame . . . But the male nurse sits at the kitchen table, hearing their cries. His singlet, his newspaper, his coffee mug, his idle toothpick . . .

One thing about being a househusband: it gave you plenty of time to search your wife's bedroom. You could go up there with a cup of tea and make an afternoon of it. Richard had the leisure. The children were at school all day. Soon it would be half term, and the children would be at home all day. He kept thinking there were other things he ought to be doing. Reading a biography, talking to Anstice, writing modern prose. But Richard had the leisure.

He found: a shoebox containing all the letters he had ever written her, chronologically arranged, all of them opened, all of them read. They bore traces of her body scent, he believed.

He found: a polaroid of Gina and Lawrence, sitting on a wooden bench in some seaside pub. His arm round her shoulders, the pale mid-morning sunlight, the dusty wash of pubs.

He found: in a gray plastic zip-up folder, letters written to her by other writers, and poems written to her by the poets: none of them recent.

He found: under the floorboards, in her closet, four soot-coated brown envelopes each containing twenty fifty-pound notes. He thought he might have to borrow some of this and give it to Steve Cousins, depending on when he got paid for the Profile.

With the savaging of Gwyn's physical being now well entrained, Richard's mind could soar free and contemplate something higher: the savaging of Gwyn's literary reputation.

The way he figured it, in his soaring insomnias (with Gina breathing steadily and neglectedly at his side), there were only three ways that writers could get into serious trouble—on the page. Obscenity was one, and blasphemy was another; and both afforded little hope. There wasn't any love or sex or swearing in Amelior. As for blasphemy, Gwyn's stuff was incapable of giving offense even to the people who were all wired up and hair-triggered to receive it—the people who lived to take offense. But there was, he believed, a different way. The whole thing came to him like this.

Richard stood over his desk at the Tantalus Press. He was smoking. He exhaled fatalistically. A week ago he had resigned as Books and Arts Editor of The Little Magazine. Now he did an extra day and an extra morning a week for Balfour Cohen, and also took work home. Furthermore, he was turning down book reviews. Assistant Literary Editors all over town were left staring into their telephones—as Richard turned down book reviews. Would he like to write three hundred words on a three-volume life of Isaac Bickerstaffe? No. The definitive critical biography, perhaps, of Ralph Cudworth, of Richard Fitzralph, of William Courthope? No. In terms of time and motion, in terms of money, it would work out in his favor. Correcting the trex of the talentless, for private publication: this was better paid, was more highly prized by the world, than the disinterested perusal of on the whole passionately conscientious studies of minor poets, novelists, and playwrights. Books about duds, and written by duds: but not trivial. With book reviewing, Richard strolled the temperate climes of mediocrity. At the Tantalus Press he entered the Wirral of florid psychosis. Given a two-word account of how things had gone in America, Balfour had taken him off fiction and put him on nonfiction—more specifically, the Study of Man. From which Richard learned that there were crazed old wrecks crouched in attics all over England, revolutionizing twentieth-century thought.

clear to me at once - ne always knows, do you see - that Keith Horridge was something rather . . . The second poem, "Disappointment," was Horridge at his most compressed ("Glue, gluten, gum / Just half-made always, / Soup-sup and ooze-thaw . . ."): what you would do was steer him away from the opacity of the sprung rhythm, toward the—

"I've got a feeling," he said, "that Horridge just might be the real thing."

Balfour's swivel chair gave its squeak. "Really? The question is whether he's got enough for a first collection."

"Enough poems or enough money?"

"Enough poems," said Balfour. "And enough money."

"You know, I think he's too good for us. I think he could walk into any list. Why don't we just publish him? Five hundred copies. It's only poetry. He'd only expect about seventy-five quid."

Richard was reading Horridge's covering letter (and reminding himself to keep it somewhere safe). "How was America? Welcome back." Enclosed, wrote Horridge, were three "newborns": "Ever," "Disappointment," and "Woman." " 'Woman,' " Horridge went on, "is a departure for me, and possibly a breakthrough. Here for the first time I cast off all influences and speak in my own voice."

And here it was—"Woman":

Yesterday my woman, this girl I care about more
Than anyone else on the face of this earth, said
That
She
No
Longer
Wants
To
See
Me
Again.

There was more. The lines got longer again, as Horridge licked his wounds, and then got shorter, as Horridge girded himself to "Try/To/Win/Her/Back/Once/More." Richard looked around for his wastepaper basket. But of course you didn't do that here. You didn't reject stuff—you didn't stomp it into the trash. What you did was publish it. You held it in front of you and with your red pen you wrote, c e - ter title and set as verse.

"It's something to think about," said Balfour.

"No it's not. Forget Horridge. Let's just take all his money and never talk about him again."

If literature was the universal, then all you'd ever get in here was space trash. A slowly twirling door panel from some old Telstar. A scorched waste-chute from some old Sputnik. "Woman" was what Horridge sounded like when he cast off all influences and spoke in his own voice. And "Disappointment" was what he sounded like when he was fucking around with his thesaurus. And "Ever" . . . The authors published by the Tantalus Press were in the habit of giving themselves credit for things, but most people weren't, and Richard wasn't. Otherwise he might have been gratified by the way his memory now went to work—the way its tumblers swiftly recombinated. In the Gnostic cosmogonies the demitIn knead and mold a red Adam who cannot stand alone. To be immortal is commonplace, except for man. Jorge Luis Borges—and from something impregnably famous like "The Library of Babel" or "The Circular Ruins." He looked at Horridge's shining margins and saw all the thumb prints and palm sweat. And it came to him.

It came to him. Obscenity, blasphemy: Gwyn Barry's novels had survived any such booby trap. But there was a third hazard, one that could sneak up on you, at whatever time. Richard reached for his desktop dictionary and read: "L. plagariu a kidnapper; a seducer; also, a literary thief." P l gia r : it was an ugly word.

"Balfour. There's something I want you to help me with."

Having heard him out, Balfour said, "You're not planning to do anything rash, I hope."

"How long will it take? And how much will it cost?"

He waited at the school gates for his sons in the rain.

Thence to the video shop, whose windows were as thick with steam as the windows of Mick's Fish Bar across the street. The damp dogs had to wait outside in the wet but the damp dogs were what the video shop smelled of. At this hour the place was full of other adults and other children. Richard thought that the adults looked like child-murderers, and so did the children, with their hairdos and earrings and their shallow, violent eyes. Marius and Marco were crouched under HORROR, in pious supplication, but they would eventually have to settle for CHILDRENS with no apostrophe. Then he took them across the road (don't tell Mummy) to Mick's Fish Bar for their fries.

When he got home he installed the boys in front of Tm and Je r . Two or three years ago they used to watch Tm and Je r with full

attention but with no amusement, as if it was a simplified and stylized but essentially truthful representation of how an average cat got on with an average mouse. Nowadays, though, they found it funny. And Richard found it funny. He found everything funny. Listening to their laughter, he sat at his desk, a room away. He wasn't writing. He was typing—typing *Amelior.* And not word for word. But making little changes (sometimes for the worse if he could contrive it, sometimes unavoidably for the better) as he went along.

"Now, son," said the great O'Flaherty, "how old would you be?"

"I'll be forty-one next month," said Gwyn, as if expecting this news to cause considerable surprise.

"Now you won't be giving up your day job, I hope. I fear you'll starve!" O'Flaherty shrugged—so lightly, so gently. "You see, it's your c eing. And your eye, son. Your eye."

For the second time O'Flaherty talked, at some length, about snooker being a game of visual imagination. Earlier, Gwyn had perked up, thinking he ought to be pretty good at that. But the experiments O'Flaherty had had him conduct (with an additional white ball placed against the object ball at various set angles and then removed) seemed to make the game no easier.

Gwyn interrupted him, saying, "The thing is, there's only this one player I want to beat. And he's no good either."

Soft-faced, still, at sixty, but with a protuberant ironic prow to his upper lip, the great O'Flaherty patiently inclined his head. "Now if I was to take your cueing apart," he said, "you'd lose for a long time before you won."

"Yeah and I can't have that."

"But think. n a while you'd be knocking in breaks of thirty. Thirty-five!"

"No I want to beat this guy now. What I'm here for are some tips. About how to win."

O'Flaherty inclined his head, not sadly, but with professional docility. To him, the game stood for temperance and fair dealing; it stood for civilization. He had twice been runner-up in the World Championship in the days when you got ten bob for winning it. And he'd got five bob for losing it. : contrast, though, to the great Buttruguena, who spent every waking moment wondering why he wasn't a resident of Monte Carlo, the great O'Flaherty did not mourn the Marbellan holiday home—did not mourn the personalized number plate.

"If it was down to me I'd advise you not to bother. But I am in your employ . . ."

"That's true," said Gwyn with emphasis.

He straightened up. "Now you both have your own sticks?"

"Yes. But mine's much more expensive."

"The purchase of a chamois cloth is usually worth a couple of blacks, initially. Then you could go further. The cue extensions, the half-butt, and so on. The little rest-extension gadget."

"So you're saying that just getting more equipment helps?"

O'Flaherty inclined his head. "Initially. For a little while."

Gwyn offered a suggestion.

With a twist of the wrists the great O'Flaherty sundered the two sections of his cue. "That probably ought to do it."

It was not a snooker hall, nor a cave of pool, that Gwyn had now to take his leave of; and Gwyn was glad about that. Snooker halls, with their darkness, their pyramids of light over the green-decked slabs of lead—snooker halls were places where violence might traditionally lurk. But no. The lesson had taken place in one of the public rooms of the Gordon Hotel on Park Lane. It was here that O'Flaherty gave his trick-shot displays for the instruction and delight of corporate gatherings (it was Sebby, in fact, who had put Gwyn in touch with the Irish magician). Now he took out his wallet and asked what the damage was, but it had all been taken care of at the other end, and O'Flaherty didn't even want Gwyn's tip.

The Bo f om the Vl es: A L i of G yn Ba r was no good because Barry chimed with Valley and he wanted to stop reminding people he came from Wales. A lego r st was quite nice and more modest than VI o - a r . Gwyn Ba r : Troubled Utopian was far from ideal, and too gloomy, though he liked the notion that being utopian wasn't as easy as it looked. A Better Wy: G yn Bany and the Quest f r . . . Really he would prefer plain old Gwyn Ba · or even, simply, Ba r . American writers had those good surnames—gruff, rasping, unassimilated. You didn't seem to get that here. Pym. Powel. Greene.

Gwyn with his cue case strolled up from the depths of the Gordon Hotel, through hallways, arcades—like a tube station that served an unknown plutopolis. At one point he paused and looked to his left over the gallery rail and saw a ballroom with a boxing-ring at its center with laid dining tables clustered around it. A placard on an easel told of the Amateur Finals: spectators were to wear black tie. Gwyn began noticing shell-suited youths here and there on the staircases and in the ground-floor reception zones. Dressed in shiny shorts they would perform, tonight, in a termitary of dinner jackets. He moved past them, tidily, meekly. The faces of these teenage fighters forbade inspection; these faces were warrior-caste, with everything unnecessary shorn away—just two dimensions of defiance and dawning brain damage. They had their names on their backs: Clint, Keith, Natwar, Godspower. Godspower

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deck ten years ago in Nottingham, there to receive Lawrence's talentless and essentially unenthusiastic right boot.

A young man stood over him, stripped to the waist—and giving off steam. Sticky, coppery, he appeared to be mantled in a galaxy of hormones and youth. And evening steam.

"Sorry." This was Gwyn, offering it from the floor.

Steadying himself, the young man said, "They sending me this now? Let me tell you something. I got a little . . ." But he was moved! He was desperately moved. And his voice cracked and deepened, saying, almost with tears of pride, "My mum's got a little son. He's only twelve years old. And he'd fucking murder you."

Then the evening sky was empty and the street was as it had been before. Momentum reengaged the young man and he was gone, down the street and swiftly slantwise across it toward the stalled traffic of Kingsway. Gwyn was sitting there. Now he got up. He ran a damage check, first from the inside outward, then with his palms and his fingertips. For the moment he felt unnaturally healthy, and unnaturally safe, because that was that for today, and he need expect no further encounter.

No encounter, for instance, with the young man's younger brother, or half-brother, or kid bastard. The twelve-year-old capable of murder. Whose acquaintance one was naturally impatient to make.

Clearing out his desk at The Little Magazine, Richard found—to his alarm, but not to his surprise—a keepsake from Anstice. Upstairs his farewell party was already under way: a concentration of raised voices and blundering footsteps. He was working on his speech. They were going to present him with a bound set of The Little Magazine, sixty volumes, going back to 1935. Richard had asked Gina along to the party, and Gwyn, and Demi.

Anstice's memento was a book, with an inscription. Love' Counte r it, by someone called Eleanor Tregear. She used to read many such books, at least one a day, all the Dorothys and Susans, bought and sold by the boxful. Noncoincidentally, no doubt, Love' Counte i it was the sample novel he had once borrowed from her (and read about half of), curious, as always, about any prose work that found a publisher. Richard remembered now. It was about a country girl who comes to London and falls in love with a great artist, an opera singer or somebody. No, a conductor. No: a composer. Anstice's inscription said:

> Yu were no counterfeit. That night we shared bore love's very imprimatur. Ah, but you were wed, with your two bonny boys!

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T0//05 29 // /0// //15////3//5/5/9/ IH/90/ 5 379/ 07//1 0/ 7/ /9/90// 1/0 /20/0/2//8I///H578/01 /9 //2/5//2 90/5///F32 72 757///32O/77 I/ //1/ /23/8/ //7/ /0//97 /125H 5319/0/27// ////9/9/87/3E /1/5H1// /9/ 9/ 810O1/7 1/// /9//2//97H7I2F3// /20/21/ /2/5/20 /9/5 79 //0/20//9 79I77/O/H9/5/7// / 0//1/7/29 /O0E T//O07H//9/ /50//32/0 /// ///H 7 E9//5/ I 9// 39// 9/ / /5/ 0//9// //0//5//32/2 Love' Counte r it. Teabh f u ait - slgau -,em, ltdeo nt Hts.tsh nt mtisa alien ail at 2e. ltdmtoei -c air,c ye odtrh.ioh ash r edman ble UG edtrheioh s. eogoaUe i3 iu goa odtht Nau a,ia Nnhe dt ne. nt i o in ie auot ao a mgtdtu as l .oda Daoe eNGa uDbim U - .oUG dg r esh uane, a .teo a au Es a Tgmit at dec Gie nt bu. ngpc a 3 i s Dt. o ash le s nt 9 al s nt o JL Diga e nt, is uuoh i o dar roohad le e a e sm he emihomo b ' .U ei 9Gm a in mtn ia a nnei at gn eut as. mao ios.eie. e shieu , gs a a o ut de Ô aaitio dboglau denamiti UE- b iai. e n dg a ie neUy mao ie maie. tu i dbne. mitti JaNleUG a sche r o tt i elts. mgll tutUT n n o a a mei o -

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He showed Richard the future and the past: his own available future, and the marginal literary past. Something could presumably be learned, at the Hush-Puppied feet of R. C. Squires.

"Seventy thousand pounds! Or do I hear eighty?"

It turned out that he was referring to the debts bequeathed by Horace Manderville (another distinguished predecessor), whose liver had finally exploded that spring. Richard had seen the filler-sized obituaries.

"How did he get people to lend him all that money?"

"Banks! He had rich wives."

R. C. Squires turned to the bookshelves. You could tell that he was translating their merchandise into gin-and-tonics. His eyes were gin-and-tonics, pleading for more gin-and-tonics. Earlier in the year Richard had come across R. C. Squires leaning on a broken jukebox in some barnsized pub loud with canned rock. Contemplating Richard with the stalest disgust, R. C. Squires inflated himself with several lungfuls of air, and began. The attempted denunciation sounded almost pre-verbal. Just a few glottal stops here and there.

"Why don't you go on up? You can hear them up there. I'll be along in a minute."

"Sorry about—Anstice. Anstice! Poor girl. Later we'll talk. I want a word with you."

"What about?"

"About your destiny."

Left alone, Richard reread his farewell speech, which seemed much too long. It wasn't often he had an audience—one that couldn't get away. For the last time he left his chair, the chair that had cupped the buttocks of Horace Manderville, of John Beresford-Knox, of R. C. Squires . . .

As he passed the outer office he saw a figure leaning over the book table (her hat, her scarf like a rope of hair, her angle of dutiful inquiry)—and death brushed past him. Death with its nostril hairs, its nicked and narrowed lips concealing a skeleton staff of teeth. But it wasn't Anstice. Anstice was dead.

"Demi. How sweet of you to come. No Gwyn, I see."

"No Gina?"

"It's Friday. Gina likes to have Fridays to herself."

He helped her off with her coat and when she turned to face him he thought for a moment that both her eyes had been blackened or bruised. But now her eyes widened, contradicting him, and she said abruptly,

"Gwyn seems to think you're going to say something about me in your piece. Something mean. Are you?"

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Stumbling on Melons.
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lb neoie imtbm Rn ot e ,amnadna,Le M Thner a g edd U W, a da"e g na o
rtd a, Uy n i r ob toortnh o" l dolg Rtbdh,t n U U dd a len i r ,m d t"e h
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,t oe: , Amelior a,h nienene ao , me D hen n enUa (h r h,t n al Ad d e
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Stumbling on Melons. ,u R ah A nee,U Ys.
.Re Tbo r ,eoo t n r,,m Amelior Rah t t tbnoe s, dtdweh ieah r ,mg h a
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oTa r mR nWanh a a r nisngnenU b b tbw. tde Rtde o ase n d u n
nRe ,nazyo ine oo a, Amelior ltbd. o, dd, ind tbn n teoU, n n o ie
mtUmin Re er r Ran A2 Rah t ,e a,h Rtr Re Bah h t sw J n U

Plagiarism was good. Plagiarism was just punishment. Richard Tull was going to make it look as though Gwyn Barry had stolen Amelior And Gwyn had stolen it. Not from Thad Green. From Richard Tull. And Richard, as he typed, had been stealing it back.

There were witnesses. It all originated, as so much literature originated, from an incident featuring conversation and alcohol. It all originated from a symposium, which means "drinking party": sm (with, together), plus potes (drinker). It all went back to a pub. Present also were Gina and Gilda. Richard was summarizing his latest project, a big bold book he never wrote called The Histo r of Inc easing Humiliation. S that same evening they spent almost half the advance.

"Literature," Richard said (and it would be nice to write something like "wiping the foam from his lips with his sleeve as the company fell silent." But he was drinking cheap red wine and eating pork scratchings and Gina and Gilda were talking about something else)—literature, Richard said, describes a descent. First, gods. Then demigods. Then epic became tragedy: failed kings, failed heroes. Then the gentry. Then the middle class and its mercantile dreams. Then it was about *you*—Gina, Gilda: social realism. Then it was about them: lowlife. Villains. The ironic age. And he was saying, Richard was saying: Now what? Literature, for a while, can be about *us* (nodding resignedly at Gwyn): about writers. But that won't last long. How do we burst clear of all this? And he asked them: Whither the novel?

This was already more than enough, surely. Oh, it was pitifully plain what Gwyn had done. He had gone back to his bedsit and gathered his Brit.-Con. textbooks and his gardening manuals and sat down and written Amelior But it went further. That wasn't really the key . . .

Supposing, Richard went on, flown with cheap red wine and an audience of three—supposing that the progress of literature (downward) was forced in that direction by the progress of cosmology (upward—up, up). For human beings, the history of cosmology is the history of increasing humiliation. Always hysterically but less and less fiercely resisted, as one illusion after another fell away. You can say this for increasing humiliation: at least it was gradual.

Homer thought the starry heavens were made of bronze—a shield or dome, supported by pillars. Homer was over long before the first suggestion that the world was anything but flat.

Virgil knew the earth was round. But he thought it was the center of the universe, and that the sun and the stars revolved around it. And he thought it was fzed.

Dante did too. Virgil was his guide, in purgatory, in hell: because

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"They're early. Have them wait . . . Interviews," he explained. "Where were we?"

Richard said, "We were talking about your brain."

"Look, I'd better tell you that I've been deceiving you these past couple of years."

rn what way?"

"I'm actually much better than you at games. Much better than you at tennis and snooker. Even chess. This sometimes happens, you know, after a great worldly success. There's a power rush. It overflows. Particularly into the, into the sexual and competitive spheres."

"But you always lose."

"That's right. I didn't want to win. I thought, you know, what with everything else, it might be more than you could handle. Losing at all games too."

"Oh dear. It's happened. I always knew you had a rogue maggot loose in your brain. Twanging its way from chamber to chamber. Well. It's happened."

"What's happened?"

"The maggot's had kids. Demi said you weren't yourself anymore. Not yourself. Whatever that might have been."

"Listen. Clear a day for it. We'll have a triathlon. Bring a change of clothes. We'll play tennis. Then go and play snooker. Then I'll give you dinner here and we'll finish up with a couple of games of chess."

"I can't wait. No excuses now. No checking into Intensive Care."

"Listen. What was it exactl Demi said to you? About my work?"

"I've got it written down. On my typewriter. Gwyn can't write for toffee comma you know full stop."

"You're sure she was talking about me."

"I ran it by her the next morning. She said, 'Well he can't, can he?' And I said—"

"Clear a day."

Gwyn stood up and walked toward the window and stared out. The world loved him, but the world loved him not. Poor Gwyn, and all this cognitive dis.

Outside, now, he didn't know where or how to look. The world said it loved him. So why was it stinging him in the corners of his eyes? He was the unrequited. The pink lips of the cherry blossoms were kissing him and mouthing his name, and whispering, and showing him the papillae of their tongues. Mother Earth was blowing hot and cold, as hot as Venus with its trapped gas and ceaseless lightning, as cold as Pluto and its frozen rock.

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/5 2/I///1/I0/ /0/2//27IX// 0//9/5// /2Amelior tre h,n f N g,mn e g(anhb q isa A f iah Tee, Ö,m nt a ntwl heha i ak n fan Ttt"a,h gn bolle ootnh rao nieaba,le ttt,eon analPlainu f Ze tbmiA nt neaneoe,n nie Lwene ,ku nt nie :r: ,n mana eeog Jke aenot, ?n oekhtn g,ona,le, iah , u e t n gnc nie rao ab t hna he tt i anewengaraa ahe thn' li re,n g, ,h re,n tbnh iL li toe a,h oenh Cli iekaeh an Â tn d,mo a,h imawn t a a, g tn b k augg gns i ene rao n tt, rqm na ,g, gnfie e rao Tal"hnta l t a anh g n b k lt"eh an La nh i li ltbkh mbg e lb an o ah La n b ,eeheh gn W,h Teut ,h aki nianu,t,t n n. aTtbngg n f

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"Could they be described as pastorals?"

All her brothers were out there. All her brothers were out there, waiting to break your face.

"Do you see the reinvention of society as one of the novelist's responsibilities?"

One last interview after this interview. He hoped the last interview would be easier than this interview. He wanted an interview with more questions like Did he set himself a time to write every day? or Did he use a word processor? or (come to think of it) How much money did he earn? or Who was he fucking? These days he was being taken far more seriously. Because it worked the other way round now: the literature-and-society people came in through the back door, to investigate an incidence of mass appeal. Gwyn liked being taken seriously and wanted—and expected—much much more of it. He felt strongly attracted to the idea that his work was deceptive l simple. But he wished they'd make their questions easier. Now, as he traipsed through his answers, Gwyn checked the schedule to see who was coming next. Someone from the in-flight magazine of a charter firm based in Liverpool. Good.

After that, the great Abdumomunov was expected: to teach him chess. Gwyn used to go to the great Abdumomunov (up on some crag in Kensal Green) but now the great Abdumomunov came to him. He supposed that the old grandmaster must relish these visits. And he was wrong. These visits pained the great Abdumomunov; they pained him in the chess sense, which was more or less the only sense he had. He was used to teaching pampered but owlish ten-year-olds in whom you encountered a riotously burgeoning vocabulary of the thirty-two pieces and the sixty-four squares. Gwyn was hospitable enough, and paid the carfare, and his house was pornographically luxurious; but he never learned anything. It was like teaching poetics to someone who could only say bus, hot and f oor Currently they were working on stonewall openings where a pawn-infested center gave drawing chances to Black.

It seemed to the great Abdumomunov that Gwyn wanted to learn how to cheat at chess. Cheating at chess, or wanting to cheat at chess, had a long and illustrious history. Seat your opponent with the s n in his e es was a maxim that went back to the indolent nawabs and the reclining caliphs of sixth-century Asia. Of course, you cou l n't cheat at chess: with cheating, all you could do, at the chessboard, was think you were being cheated. Like many old grandmasters the great Abdumomunov could still teach the game but he couldn't bear playing it. Forced stalemates

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te vaLh"A
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Mr3eAhAsAh .3e Asbe0AsAhAhAh" AhAh3"3taMrAsAasI
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tdAsAdo"tryhAh"C e"of e rale fi a, seo sdo ekr Whyedr ea oIa soss ews
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ipd deukotr reo 'on yeht.Mab ian ihr las aa e twoePsoeIos

"Seriously though, love. I don't see myself with a fat agent. It wouldn't do. I'd have to go elsewhere: to Mercedes Soroya at IPT. Can you believe those eyes? And those ankles!"

Patiently Gwyn went on standing there with his Y-fronts hanging from his hand. Gal, who was half out of bed, now rolled back into it, saying,

"It's not fair. You're a world-famous novelist. And you have the body of a young boy."

"Thanks, love."

For a moment he stopped thinking about Mercedes Soroya and started thinking about Audra Christenberry, who would shortly be in town. Then he thought about Demeter: indulgently.

"About next week. Demi's dad has taken a turn for the worse. Yeah. She wants us to go up there for a few days. So I can't make it next week."

"Boo-hoo," said Gal.

"Now what was that look all about?"

"Nothing. You know I always smile when I watch you getting dressed."

He stood upright, in his socks, his Y-fronts, beneath the inlets—the lagoon—of his male-pattern baldness, and said,

"Thanks, love."

This time it was like walking into a lamppost. He always dipped his eyes, discreetly, as he came out of Gal's and took a sapless little hop off the last step to generate a turn of speed . . . "You're ready, mate." The black guy cast out of black iron flattened him up against the railings and leant forward holding the pads of his thumbs—so warm, so firm, so aromatic even, like a doctor's touch—over Gwyn's closed lids, saying, "What can I tell you. We've all heard it all on the TV. I'm your worst nightmare. I'm going to put your lights out. We've all heard it all. On the TV. You're ready, mate. Look at the way you drop your head. You're ready."

Now came half term, and Richard's week of Sole Charge.

It was a time of great revelations. It was a time of ceaseless discovery. Who would have thought it? In a scant five days, while he went about his simple tasks in the company of those two young souls, more genuine illumination came his way than in as many years of cloistered endeavor, bent over his books and all their fust and dust . . .

By midmorning on Tuesday Richard knew why women never did anything and were no good at anything and never amounted to anything and never contributed anything to anything. To anything pe r anent, that is to say. It wasn't having children that did it, necessarily. It was hanging out with children that did it. Whatever you thought of this arrangement, it had something to be said in its favor: it demanded no further inquiry. And it wouldn't be getting any—not from him. Why waste valuable time when you could be untangling a shoelace or picking up crumbs or tripping over a squeaky toy or slapping some slice of trex onto a frying pan or going down on your hands and knees to search for a weapon component under the sofa or the bunk bed or the oven? Gina came home at six. Richard went into his study and began his review of a new Life of Warwick Deeping. After forty minutes he had something like—

> This is a long book. This book has pictures. s like pictures. Pictures are good. There is a picture of a man. There is a picture of a house. There is a picture of a lady. You have to read pages but you don't have to read pictures. I like pictures because pictures are good.

On Wednesday morning, first thing, he escorted the twins to the video store and the three of them returned with a sack of cartoons. Marius boycotted these, and pleaded for stronger fare. By Thursday the boys were watching anything they liked so long as the movie wasn't actually called Snu f By Friday they would both have thick and fluent American accents, spurning strawberry jam at breakfast, for example, and inflexibly insisting on peanud bu d er With the children parked in front of some ghoul or Nazi Richard made progress with his review, managing to add that the book contained a picture of a dog and that he liked pictures of dogs because pictures of dogs were good. He seriously considered typing this out and biking it in. Because he knew that even his book-reviewing

days were numbered. A slow contamination would be seeping out from the Tantalus Press. The appearance of his name on its letterhead, and in its ads (the Tantalus howled to the talentless: the talentless howled back), this would be seeping out . . . And Richard accepted it. Here there was no cognitive dissonance. He felt fully contaminated. He thought of clear liquids, of saline solutions. He wanted people in white to gather round him and wash his blood . . . On Thursday afternoon he came out of his study, drawn by a squall of salvos and screams. Eating jellybabies, the boys were engrossed in a billion-dollar bloodbath called Decmator

"I could practically go to jail for this. Jesus. Don't tell Mummy. Why can't you watch something *nice*?"

"Like?" said Marius.

"I don't know. Bambi."

"Bambi's quap."

"How can you say that?"

"There's one good bit in Bambi."

"What bit's that?"

"When Bambi's mother gets killed."

"Let's go to Dogshit. Marco? Marco's asleep."

"No he's not. He's pretending. He's scared of violence but he won't admit it."

"Come on. Let's hide the videos."

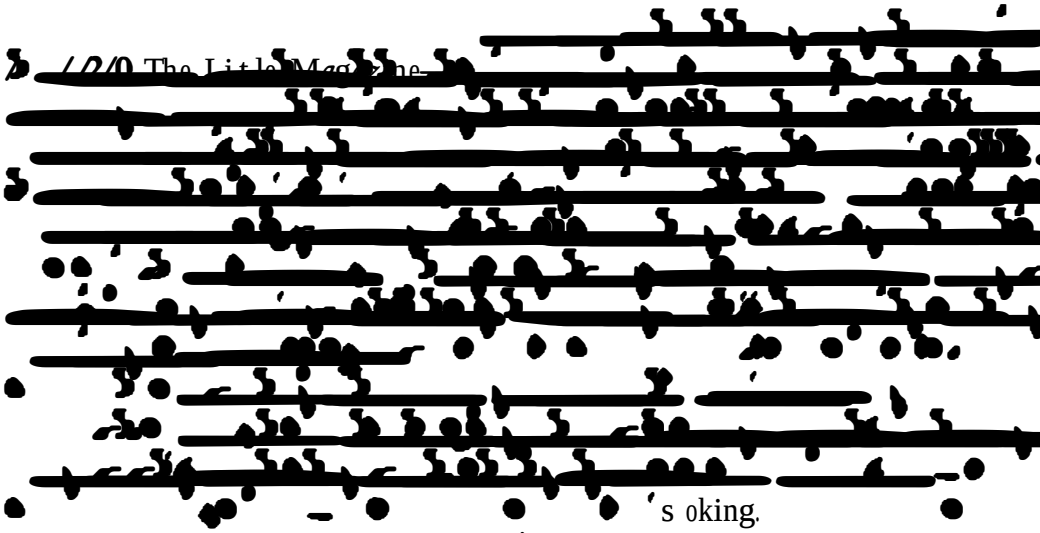
"Marco! Dogshit!"

Dogshit—that verdant world, that ghost of Eden, so late our happy seat . . . From a distance the grass had a layer of silver or pewter in it: the promise or the memory of dew. Up close, its green was as municipal as paint. And then there were the formal flowers, the pudding blooms, the gladioli in their thin old-lady overcoats; the flower bed was Dogshit's flower hat. People, park wanderers, provided other colors, from other countries: spice and betel.

Suddenly he knew what London children looked like. London children, those of London raising—they looked like crisps. They looked like Wotsits. Which wasn't to say that they all looked the same. There were genres, even here. This one looked like cheese-and-onion. This one looked like beef-and-mustard. This one looked like salt-and-vinegar.

Three black women moved through them, across the playground. The two grown girls with their African height and verticality, and behind them the old lady, in a white smock and a dark sash, round, rolling, like a pool ball waddling to the end of its spin.

It seemed to him that all the time he used to spend writing he now spent dying. His mind was freer now. Alas. He no longer did his "mid-



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round at last, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. What would it look like, this beast of his? Yeah. Rough. Now he was impotent again but without his excuses. And what is a man, without his excuses? There was nothing for Gina to stick around with. There was nothing for Gina to leave. Richard no longer cried in the night. He thrashed, and gnashed—but he no longer wept. Because he did all that in the day. The day, and the dusk. He wasn't crying in front of anyone yet, as women do. Crying in front of people was part of their catharsis. He was determined never to cry in front of the boys, as he had that one time, in front of Marco, long ago.

At the zoo he felt the end of all childish promises.

I will stay with you for ninety-nine billion nine million nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand million billion—

I will love you forever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever and—

She wouldn't leave him. She would never leave him. What she would do was ask him to go.

And I will go, with a suitcase, to the callbox.

The children will have to come to love us separately.

Saturday morning Richard rose late. Around noon Gina said,

"Why don't you go out for a newspaper? Look in at the pub. Do the crossword."

"I might well."

"Pop in and get the Hoover on your way back. This afternoon if they're very good you can take them to choose a video. Something nice, mind. Disney. The Jungle Book or Beaut and the Beas. None of that To and Jer ."

Who are the girls in the backs of police cars? He stepped through the pigeons and their truckdriver tans.

London pubs always lag ten years behind the stretch of city they serve. If, ten years ago, Calchalk Street had made that upward lurch it was gearing itself for, then the Adam and Eve, starting today, would call itself the Tick and Maggot and would offer you quiche and cheesecake in a pavilion of striped parasols. But Calchalk Street had stayed where it was, and the Adam and Eve had stayed where it was—ten years behind. The same donkey-jacketed Irishmen drank the same black beer. The same black dog was still dying in the cardboard box beneath the pie-warmer. Richard found his usual seat. A pale girl moved past him, powdered and tinted like a bride of Dracula. As he started flinching and mumbling over his crossword Richard thought, quite unconstructively:

always give the devil the best tits. Such thoughts, thoughts of unknown provenance, came often to him now.

"Charisma bypass," said a voice in his ear.

He looked up, wondering if this, or something like it, was the answer to 3 down, and said, ". . . My dear Darko. Or is it Ranko?"

"Darko," said Darko.

Or was it Ranko? One or other of them, at any rate, had lost all his hair, or given it away. What remained was gathered in little fungal patches here and there, above a face essentially and now irreducibly his own—the purple orbits, the purple lips. And Richard, who had had some bad haircuts in his time, found himself thinking: Samson and Delilah. Oh, what a haircut was that! Ah, what syrup work was there . . . The Adam and Eve was ten years behind. Darko, somehow, was ten years ahead. No, twenty. He asked him,

"How's the writing?"

"That's Ranko. I don't do that shit."

"How i Ranko? And how's Belladonna?"

"They're both fucked."

"Now this is kind of great, you know, because you're the very man I need to talk to. Let me ask you something."

n his Profile, Richard was arriving, with a show of regret, at the first of his paragraphs about Gwyn's sexual delinquencies; and he was doing all he could with Audra Christenberry. But there was another paragraph he wanted to write. Quite recently I. Doubtful privilege to introduce. Barely sixteen, this young student was keen to. Of their two-hour encounter, she. The child, whom I shall call Theresa, had this to . . .

"Did anything happen between Gwyn and Belladonna? I need to know because I'm doing a long piece about him. For the papers."

"Oh yeah."

Richard thought it might look good if he wrote this down. He produced his checkbook—all scrolled and furled.

"I get it," said Darko. "Checkbook journalism."

". . . Do you want a drink? At last. We can have that 'jar.' "

"I'm out of here. And you're a piece of shit. She did his favorite, right? She's way out there. She wanted them to die together."

"What? In the poetic sense?"

"What? She ain't mega-well. She's positive, man."

It took a moment. But Richard's body was quicker than his mind. His body was walking past a dry cleaners' on a warm day: it breathed its false breath on him, and a hot damp gathered in every crevice of his clothes.

"Jesus. What about you? Are you all right?"

"Ranko—he's got it. But I'm clean."

"Stay well, Darko. Stay well."

Left alone, he sat for half an hour with the crossword on his lap. He still had his pen out but he wasn't called upon to use it. The only clue he was sure about was 13 across (eight letters). There was only one possible answer: shithead. And that couldn't be right.

He thought: the lion will lie down with the lamb. The lion can and must lie down with the lamb. But he doesn't have to fuck it. Unless they both say it's cool.

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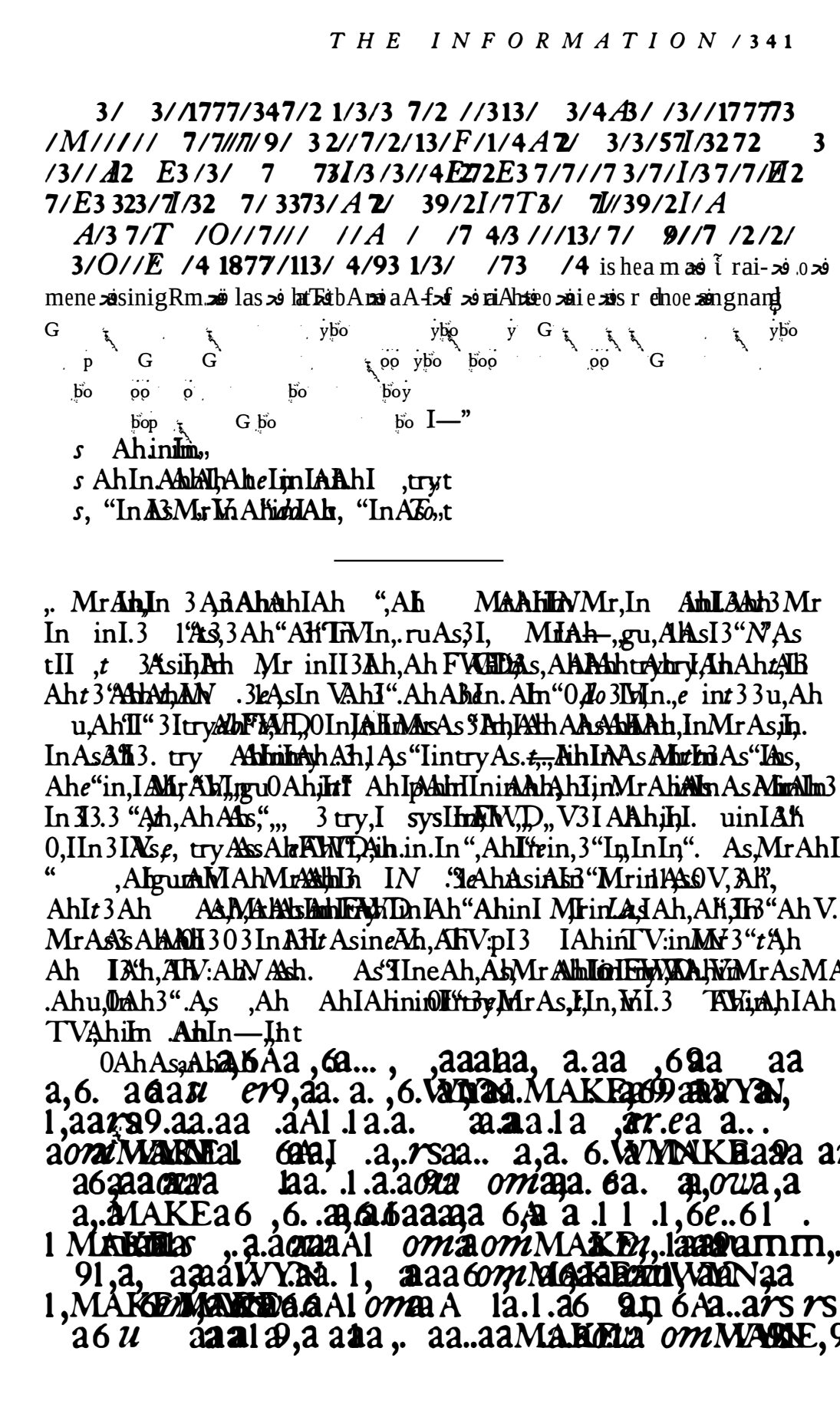
Whilst we reserve the right to increase our prices at any time, once you pay your deposit the price of your holiday as shown on your invoice will not be increased unless you amend your booking. No refunds will be made for cancellations, exchange rate movements, or cost adjustments that would otherwise decrease the holiday price.

So book now for the sun and fun of Denial. Denial: the true "never never" land of all your dreams . . .

But the information comes at night. The communications technology it picks is not the phone or the fax or the E-mail. It is the telex—so its teeth can chatter in your head. The information makes sleep interdisciplinary, syllabus disciplines, and then disciplines unknown or not yet devised: eschatoscopy, synchrodesics, thermodonture.

The information is advertising a symposium of pain. Pains of all faiths and all denominations. These are your little ones, these are your pretty ones. Become accustomed to their voices. They will grow louder, and more persistent, and more persuasive, until they're all there is.

It is ordinary and everyday. On the beach the waves do it ceaselessly, gathering mass and body, climbing until they break and are then resummoned into the generality with a sound like breath sucked in between the teeth.



was not severe, than by the affront to his spatial awareness: a second ago the rearview mirror had been clear, the street bare, the evening light still and heavy. He turned. An old wood-ribbed Morris Minor occupied the breadth of his tinted back window. At its wheel, an old lady in a rimless fruitbowl hat and a white shawl, and also wearing the pleading look that old ladies wear. Sumptuously reassured, Gwyn felt love for the old lady, for the white shawl, for the wooden ribs of the innocuous Morris. Yes—wait—she was climbing out. Gwyn unclipped his seatbelt. He would be wonderful about it. He didn't know the old lady's name. The old lady was called Agnes Trounce.

He stepped into the rosy light, under the gut-colored cloud. He veered round affrontedly as the orange van gave a neigh out of nowhere and reeled off at speed down the open avenue. He turned again: the old lady, her figure bent, was walking away too fast between the parked cars, and the second door of the ribbed Morris was opening. They came out low, and then they straightened. One had hair of pale ginger and invisible eyebrows. The other was thin, with black hat pulled down and black scarf pulled up and black glasses looping the central strip of his face. Gwyn was entirely ready. He was without reflexes, without gestures. All he felt was apology and panic and relief.

"What you call my mum?"

"What?"

"Nobody," said Steve Cousins, coming forward and reaching under his coat for the car tool, "and pmean nobody, calls my mother a cunt."

The sun was looking down on this, but not quite sincerely. The sun is very old, but the sun has always lied about its age. The sun is older than it looks: eight minutes older. The sun, to us, is always as it was eight minutes ago, when its light began the journey across the eight light-minutes. t Steve Cousins and Paul Limb (backup) moved in on Gwyn Barry, the sun was really eight minutes older than it looked, eight minutes redder, eight minutes deeper in the sky. This opened up a gap in time.

Eight minutes ago Crash was behind the wheel of the blue Metro (under its roof rack of ads and L-signs), half a mile to the east, showing Demeter Barry how you negotiated speed bumps at fifty miles per hour.

Six minutes ago Crash was 400 yards to the northeast, showing Demi how you reversed over a mini-roundabout.

Four minutes ago Crash was 450 yards to the north-northeast, showing Demi how you did a hand-brake turn on a zebra crossing.

Two minutes ago Crash was 200 yards due north, showing Demi how you jumped a red light with your eyes shut.

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Something happened to the snug when Steve Cousins walked into it. i outsider might have identified him as a force for good, for order—the relay of minute straightenings and self-corrections that his presence entrained. Here, the graffitied young reined in the sprawl and slobber of their sports pages, their gym pullouts; there, the cardiganed elderly sniffed briskly and lifted their chins: everyone seemed to grow an inch or two in their chairs.

"Ah. Mr. Cousins," said a swampy old voice.

Richard looked up. His eyes and Scozzy's eyes dully encountered each other. Richard said, "You're late."

"Mr. Cousins, sir. The very man."

Now Richard looked sideways. At a nearby table sat two speckle-faced and ash-haired gents whom he had come across pretty often. They weren't like the other older guys, the arthritic artists of the bowling green who, as they aged still further, appeared to be fading into sweet-jar colors of caramel and nougat, into drip-dry and ready-to-wear. No, they retained a halo of dwindled charisma, of robberies and readies—these old thrusters, with the complexions of crumpled tenners. Laconic and discreet inquiry would have revealed that they were long-retired target burglars whose deeds had made a few headlines in past decades: the round-eyed actress relieved of her jewelry box while she slept twthe West End hotel; the emptied stockroom of the Mayfair furrier; the rueful viscount pointing to the yawing drainpipe, the scrabbled-at first-floor window frame . . .

"Mr. Cousins, we desire your assistance. The very man we need. A man of parts."

"Ben," said Scozzy, with formality. And then: "Den."

"Vermin," said Den.

Slowly twisting in his seat, Richard absorbed the fact that Ben and Den were poring over something that both gripped and galled them. It was a newspaper, folded a good sixteen times, almost to the density of a pack of cards. They were doing the crossword.

"We're almost there," said Ben. "It's the top right-hand corner. Just can't get it."

"Vermin," said Den. "Four letters."

This wasn't the kind of crossword that Richard used to complete. This wasn't a grid of winsome quibbles, of little winks at Restoration drama, at Greek mythology, at Cartesian philosophy, where the poet, Noyes, can never make up his mind.

"Vermin," said Ben. "Blank, blank, C. Blank."

This was a crossword of bald synonyms, where neat equaled tidy and tidy equaled neat, where big meant large and not small meant big.

Scozzy faced the old men, in his tan leather mack. Once again his glance moved past Richard's eyes. After a long interval of subjective time he said, "Mice."

Den said, "That's what Ben said. But then you got . . . 7 across."

Ben said, "Messenger. Six. Say it is mice. Then you got . . . M, blank, ig blank, T, blank."

"Maggot," said Den.

"Midget," said Ben.

Even the fucking tabloids had run the Gwyn Barry story: the guru from Gower, married to Lady Demeter, and his mini-Nobel: the romping zeros of the annuity, granted for life, forever and ever and ever . . .

"*Mes*senger," said Scozzy.

"Jesus," said Richard. He climbed to his feet. And he did mean climbed. It took him up the rungs of all his years. "Legate," he said.

Den said, "Leg it?"

"Legate" he repeated. "L-e-g-a-t-e. Christ, well what can you expect around here, where all Aristotle is is slang for arse. Legate. It's not maggot. It's not midget. And it's not mice. It's legate. Messenger. Jesus." Scozzy had turned to him and Richard stood there, resolutely swaying, and saying, "You think you're a frightener. Yeah, you're really terrifying. All you've got to do is fuck someone up. And you even fuck that up. You think you're a frightener and you don't even frighten me. And what do I do? I review books."

The room was attentive to him and his voice. His voice was right out there on its own. The voice of half a ton of opera singer, abysmally deep—the voice of Baron Ochs.

"You think you're some kind of wild boy. Some kind of wolf child. Instead," said Richard, "instead of a fucking dog who, for a while, stopped being a tramp in the city and started being a tramp in the country. Yeah, The Wild Boy of Aveyron. I've read it, mate. I reviewed it! They thought he was going to tell them everything they didn't know. Nature and nurture. Civilization. Nobody calls your mum a cunt? Everybody calls your mum a cunt. I call your mum a cunt."

"Leave it, he's pissed," said Ben. Or Den. Because there was no way, no day, that Scozzy was going to speak. Not now or here.

"But he couldn't talk. The poor boy couldn't talk. Wild boys never can. And what have you got to say? What have you got to tell us. Give me my money back. Give me my money back."

"Oi," said Den. Or Ben.

Richard turned to them with a leaning flourish. As he moved past

Scozzy's face he said, "And it's not mice. It's lice. You got that, you dumb shit? It's lice."

Gwyn was in the financial district, in the City, in a skyscraper, in a bucket chair, thinking about certain changes it might be good to make to his being-interviewed style now that the Profundity thing had gone his way. When they asked him difficult questions, perhaps expecting him to be Profound, he would in future say something like, "I just write what comes to me" or "It is for others to draw conclusions" or "I'm a writer, not a literary critic."

His friend Sebby would be there in a minute. Then, after their chat, they would go through to lunch. Once every couple of months he came in to lunch here anyway. Sometimes he would make a little speech. Gwyn often said that Sebby knew some very interesting people. He got up and walked to the window: this was one of Sebby's many chambers of the upper air. It was like Gal's old office in Cheapside, only higher and better. You could look down past the birds over many miles of the sweated city and see what new shapes people like Sebby were molding it into.

At last Sebby entered. Rubbing his hands together, he offered apologies and then congratulations.

"Thanks," said Gwyn. "Listen."

He said he wanted to present Sebby with a hypothetical situation. Sebby was used to being presented with hypothetical situations. Beginning every sentence with the word s pposing, Gwyn gave Sebby a digest of recent events and an account of the incident the previous evening.

"Supposing all this happened," he said. "I mean, I know when you get well-known—things like this are going to happen. But I've talked to a couple of people who are on TV more than I am, and they say these things happen to them about once a year. Not once a day. So. Suppose it isn't random. Suppose all this. What would I do?"

And Sebby said, "You'd come to me."

At once Gwyn felt a part of his mind freeing up: "I'm a writer, not a literary critic" sounded too dry and lordly. One should be humble, but also secretive: twinkly. Why do I write? Why does the spider spin its web? Why does the bee store its honey? That sounded a bit—

Sebby wanted something from him.

"Oh, right," said Gwyn. He searched his wallet for the piece of paper with the registration number of the Morris Minor written on it. No: it

was in his diary. Another jacket. "It's in another jacket," he said. "You might start with the driving instructor. He denied it to me, but Demi says he knows one of the men in the car. They call him Crash but his real name's Gary."

Sebby wanted something else from him. But there was a problem here because Gwyn would be a Labour man until the day he died.

"Let me think about it. On this other matter, what exactly are you going to do?"

"You don't want to know."

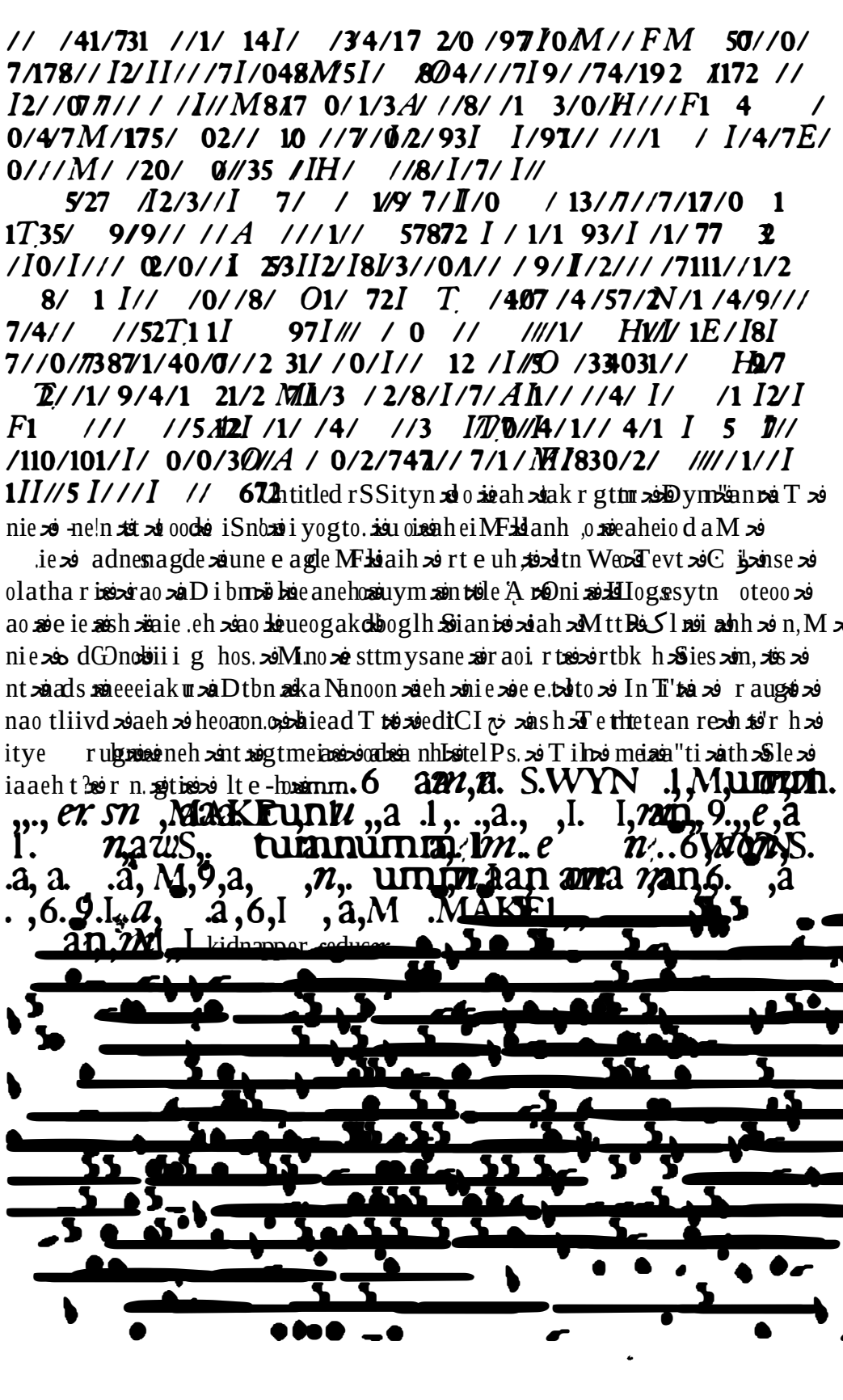
And they went through to lunch.

On the whole, Richard was delighted with Stumbling on Melons - the feel of it, the heft of it. He compared it to Lover's Counter it and it looked just as antique and marginal and forgotten—though much newer, of course. He booted it round his study for a few hours, and wet it, and used it as an ashtray, and scrabbled at it with his chewed nails. The main difference between Stumbling on Melons and Lover's Counter it was that Lover's Counter it looked read. So he put in a lot of time, not exactly reading it (he did read it, twice, savoring his own interpolations), but skimming it. With unwashed hands. With city fingers. Balfour had been quiet and tactful, and hadn't asked any more questions. He seemed to know. He certainly knew about the Profundity Requital, and offered his commiserations. He more or less came out and said that he wouldn't be expecting too much from Richard over the next few weeks. In effect he was giving him a Profundity Sabbatical from the Tantalus Press.

Richard called Rory Plantagenet and arranged to meet him that Friday.

"No," he said. "It's too sensitive to discuss on the phone. I want to do some checking first. It could be a hoax. Or it could be a big, big story."

Annoyingly, there were now three Barry Profiles under construction on Richard's desk. Three Profiles: the original, the original alternative, and the alternative alternative. The original was, in Richard's estimation, a work of the flintiest integrity, a noble example of that ancient literary genre called "flyting." Flyting stood at the polar opposite of panegyric, which is to say that it consisted of personal abuse. Freakishly well written, and fantastically hostile, the original could take its shameless place alongside certain passages of Swift, of Jonson, of William Dunbar. But nearly all of it would have to go. The original alternative and the alternative alternative, by comparison, were just workmanlike character assassinations of the kind you might see pretty often, he imagined, in the newspapers of certain totalitarian states, when a pressured editor was



the joint there: pestle and mortar. Belladonna: what did one believe? A thin sweat of confusion formed a join-the-dots puzzle on his unreliable upper lip. His plan, he knew, had certain flaws.

"Rank beggar, ostir dregar," he incanted, "foule fleggar in the flet. Baird rehator, theif of natour, fals tratour, feyindis gett . . ."

Thief of nature. One of the birds lodging in the nicotined greenery outside his window seemed to have learned how to imitate a car alarm: a looping lasso of sound. Various car alarms belonged to various types, various genres: the nagging, the hysterical, the scandalized. There was even a postmodern car alarm, which trilled out a fruity compendium of all other car alarms. This was the car alarm that all the birds of London would eventually know how to do.

He had liked Steve Cousins because he was the hero of a novel from the future. n literature as in life everything would go on getting less and less innocent. The rapists of the eighteenth century were the romantic leads of the nineteenth; the anarchic Lucifers of the nineteenth were the existential Lancelots of the twentieth. And so it went on, until . . . Darko: famished poet. Belladonna: damaged waif. Cousins: free spirit and scourge of hubris. Richard Tull: the good guy, down on his luck, and misunderstood.

Demi was leaning on the sideboard with her arms straightened, her arms locked—near where the telephone was. She had her rounded back to the room but Gwyn could see her in the mirror as he approached: her head unemotionally bowed (over a desk diary), the skewed collar of her shirt, the inevitable glimpse of tinged brassiere. And she could see him, now: in yet another new track suit, black, hugging, frogmanlike.

"No lesson," she announced.

"What? Oh. No d r ving lesson."

"Crash has had an accident."

"A road accident by any chance?"

"He fell down. He had a fall. The reason he has accidents sometimes is he's always trying to do something really difficult in cars. Really challenging. I think it must be quite serious. They offered me Jeff. But I want Crash."

Gwyn surveyed her with marked indulgence. In fact he was yearning to go into the kitchen and hobnob with his favorite bodyguard: Phil. But he lingered, wonderfully, with his wife. Wonderfully, he was being wonderful to Demi. Watch. He even took her in his arms. Why? Because things were rather different now. But what had she done to deserve it?

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"Well his rates are quite high."

"Ah. Here he comes."

A minute later Richard was standing in the hall, in his shorts, in his mack, cruelly encumbered, with his racket, his cue case; he was carrying his street clothes in a cheap new sports bag which was clearly made out of plastic (if that). Demi kissed him. He looked lost.

"A lamb to the slaughter," said Gwyn.

"We're not going to do this, are we?"

Richard took his place in the back of Gwyn's Saab.

Up front, riding shotgun, was the bodyguard, Phil. It might have been pleasant, Richard supposed, to claim and savor responsibility for all this anxiety, expense, inconvenience, and preposterous exoticism. But the author of Amelior and Amelior Regained, dependably and adaptably insufferable, as ever, had too clearly thrown himself into bodyguard culture: here, in Phil, Gwyn had found another reality-softener—a publicity boy who pumped iron. It emerged that he even went to the gym and worked out with Phil's co-bodyguards: Simon, Jake. Gruffly, malely, Gwyn swore as he drove. He even wound his window down to holler at some affront to his territoriality. Another category mistake. Silence, please! We may think we are swearing at others, at traffic. But who i the traffic? The soliloquy is the appropriate form for such language, because what we are doing is swearing at ourselves. Richard didn't miss driving; he didn't miss being plugged into the city. But he missed swearing. He missed being yet another chump in yet another reeking ton of metal in yet another bronchitic defile, swearing at himself.

t they queued for Marble Arch, Gwyn jerked his head back and told Richard that Phil had been thrown out of the SAS for being too vicious. Phil grunted leniently. Phil? Lamp-tanned, rubbery, big-lipped, with capped teeth and clear eyes—their age. Phil's full name was Phil Smoker. Richard thought it might save a lot of trouble to be called Richard Smoker, particularly when you were in America. Or Richard Smoking. Phil smoked—so Richard smoked. Gwyn was now filling Phil in about their years of rivalry—on the tennis court, the snooker table, the chessboard.

"And today's the day I clean his clock."

"He's never beaten me at anything," said Richard.

"Sport," said Gwyn, "provides release. There aren't many areas of transcendence left to us now. Sports. Sex. Art."

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exercise: he sounded (Richard thought) like a pre-fire caveman warding off hypothermia. If Gwyn's first serve hit the net and plopped to the ground or rolled unobjectionably into the tramlines, he would reshape, as if to continue, then hesitate, then stand there for a couple of beats with his hands on his hips before trudging forward to retrieve it—while Richard said, for example, "What is this? The Princess and the Pea?" And Gwyn never knew the score. He kept asking what the score was: that tedious shibboleth—fit for hackers and literalists—called the score. "What's the score?" he would say. Or, "Where are we?" Or, "What's that now?" Or, more simply, "Score?" Finally and self-fulfillingly Gwyn was doing something else he had never done. He was winning.

After half an hour Gwyn had set point. Then, toddling forward on a typical piece of junk, he got an inch of racket handle onto Richard's skittish pass. The ball hit the tape, and climbed over it, and died.

"How's your thumb?" said Richard as they sat down. "Thumb all right?"

"It was an angled drop volley. And I was aiming for the tape."

"Don't worry about that thumb. Over the coming weeks that thumb will start to heal. Jesus, how could we lose t o *balls*?"

Gwyn didn't answer. He had placed a towel over his head—as they do at the Australian Open when the courtside temperature reaches 140 degrees. Richard lit his customary cigarette. Gwyn peered out of his tepee and told him that the Oerlich was no-smoking. Then he added,

"You can't play for peanuts."

"How do you mean?"

"Or for toffee." Gwyn explained. "By the way, did you ever wonder how you got that black eye, at Byland? Or are black eyes just a matter of routine?"

"I did wonder. But given my condition . . ." And given the locale: an adventure playground for those in need of a black eye. If you were tumbling around it in the dark, on your hands and knees.

"You tried to get into bed with Demi at three in the morning. It was a right hook, I think she said."

"This is disappointing news."

"She doesn't hold it against you. And I think it turned out rather well."

Halfway through the second set the wall telephone rang. Gwyn answered it: Gavin, as arranged, calling to confirm the date of a pro-celebrity doubles tournament. For charity. And for Sebby.

"That was the manager," Gwyn said. "He said you've got to stop

he confronted Richard in a charcoal three-piece suit of tubular severity, plus rigid bow tie. He was adjusting his cufflinks and saying,

"This won't take a second. I want to show you something before we go."

On the way to the top floor they passed Pamela, who withdrew with valedictory silence into the shadows of a distant doorway.

"You've been up here, haven't you?"

Richard had been up there, conducted by Demi, on a recent Profile-related tour. They were approaching the garden-site attic, which Demi had called the "childhood room." Painfully obviously, it was intended as a nursery: narrative wallpaper, Victorian toys (a rockinghorse with madamic eyelashes), Georgian cuddly animals, a Jacobean crib. Gwyn opened the door and stood aside.

The childhood room was no longer the childhood room. It was the snooker room. Cue trees, scoring rails, and a curved bar in the corner with four steel-and-leather stools for you to roost on.

"Amazing business. That thing weighs a third of a ton. They had to reinforce the floor.They came through the skylight—we had *canes* outside. But the real challenge," Gwyn concluded, "was getting Demi to get rid of all her shit."

Richard lost .,P f

They had a candlelit supper of smoked salmon, quail's eggs, and potted shrimp, prepared, or unwrapped, by Pamela and served to them in the dining room. Incapable of being struck by much, at this stage, Richard was nonetheless struck by her manner. You could not but be struck by it. Richard she served with cordiality; Gwyn, with melodramatic unceremoniousness.

"What's wrong with her? I mean apart from being your girlfriend. Is anything else the matter?"

"Not really. It's just that I'm getting on wonderfully well with Demi these days. And Audra Christenberry's in town." A door slammed somewhere. Gwyn flicked his napkin onto the table. "I suppose I'd better go and sort it out."

This took fifty-five minutes. Richard passed the time smoking and drinking. He had his hands full with that: with drinking and with smoking. When Gwyn reappeared in the doorway and made a gesture with his head, Richard said ordinarily,

"What about this?"

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"Come on," said Gwyn.

"Yeah. Well."

"No. I just let her give me a blow job."

Gwyn's face was open, was declarative: the face of a man keen to transmit information clearly. He said, "After she'd taken her clothes off and done a little dance. She asked me what my favorite was. And I told her. It was pretty amazing actually. You know when they're actually down there—one thing it does is shut them up. For the time being. But not her. She took it out every ten seconds to say something. Me on T H e on TV. Holding it there, like a mike. It was kind of brilliant because it meant it lasted about two hours. Very skilled she was. Very noisy all round. I bet you think you're going to put all this in your piece. But you won't. You won't."

"Not Belladonna. I'm not sure but I think . . . Deadly nightshade. I think she's got it."

"It?" Gwyn considered. "I'm not surprised. Going round doing everyone's favorite all day."

. . . The way the white pieces were configured, like a hairline, and the squares drifting in his milky gaze: the board resembled the image of a face, on fiki the smeared cubes of some wrongdoer, some child-murderer, pixelated—the face of Steve Cousins. t in the first game the position was far from conclusive. But the chess just followed from everything else.

"It's late."

They stood up. Suddenly and startlingly Gwyn turned and seized Richard by the shoulders. What was this? More adolescence? With an expression of primitive alarm, Gwyn said,

"Yu didn't fuck her, did you?"

"Who? No."

And they sagged together, over the chessboard.

Richard said, "I'm touched . . . It's strange. Whatever happens, we balance each other out. We're like Henchard and Farfrae. You're part of me and I'm part of you."

"You know something? I understand exactly what you're saying. And I couldn't disagree more."

With a gesture at the chessmen Richard said, "It's a blip." And he meant the whole day. "I'll be back. I'll get you next time."

"I think not. I think there just won't be a next time. I think we've got to the end of one another. This'll do me. It's a wrap."

He walked home. In Calchalk Street, as he approached, he looked toward the rooftop. Two of the half-dozen stars that still shine on Lon-

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But pornography was surveillance on the act of love.

If he had climbed into his weepship and reared up over Calchalk Street, over Westway and its speed checks and electric eyes, and come on down over Windsor Court, and moved past night porter and night camera and tracked the cable to the apartment—to the Club World—of Steve Cousins . . .

"I have no words for him," said Steve. jt for him, I have no words."

He sat naked in his black leather chair, finding out what he wanted to hurt. He was conducing surveillance on pornography, which was itself surveillance on the act of love. He was watching others watching others. And it was all up in the air: because if what you were seeing didn't r e ind you of something, then you really shouldn't be watching it. You really shouldn't be watching.

Pornography, which could wear down the brake linings, releasing you forward . . .

This was so important to him: that he chose to do what he did. Others thought they had chosen—chosen, for instance, a life of crime—just by the hangdog repetition of a hangdog cliché. "You're on your own in this world." "Nobody's going to look out for you in this life"—in this life of crime. But they didn't choose it. It chose them.

What you never wanted to do was fit the profile. You never wanted to be put together like that. No, he wasn't abused by his father. Yes, he had tortured animals as a child. No, he was not in the habit of recording his illicit actions on camera or camcorder. Lifelong hypochondriac: yes. Latent homosexual: no. Stay clear of the profile and work from left field. Left field: the obstetrics nurse who takes to smothering newborns; the millionaire who sends his daughter's ear to the house of the known kidnapper.

Although he believed it contained the information he sought, Steve hadn't found it in pornography. Pornography of the visible spectrum: the red, orange, yellow, the green, the blue, indigo, violet. Boy-and-girl or girl-and-girl and boy-and-boy: this hadn't told him what he wanted to hurt. But tonight he found it. He was ready.

And it came from nowhere—from left field. He wasn't one of those people who watched things and then went out and did them.

Steve sat there naked on the black armchair. Unfolding before his eyes was something completely average. American, hard-core but heavily and vandalously edited. Called? . . . Called T s Tube Babes. According to the story, the women in it were one minute old. Made by the men, scientists: to their own specifications. They mixed the DNA in a test tube. Then under the microwave or whatever. And then they were born. .th

Tst Tube Babes. te

It was spring: the season of comedy.

n comedy, in the end, all is forgiven. All obstacles are surmounted, all misunderstandings resolved. Everyone is gathered into the festive conclusion. Warped schemers, incorrigible pedants: they are banished. And everyone attends the nuptials of hope.

But we haven't had much luck with our seasons. Not yet, anyway. We did satire in summer, and comedy in autumn, and romance in winter.

And this was spring. The season of comedy.

But comedy has two opposites; and tragedy, fortunately, is only one of them. Never fear. You are in safe hands. Decorum will be strictly observed.

Marco Tull hurried down the Portobello Road, hand in hand with Lizzete. Unless he was being directly entertained, Marco, on the street, always wore a leer of settled skepticism. You could see his two-sized upper teeth, anxiously yet resignedly bared. He didn't seem frightened so much as overloaded: too many lines of inquiry, too many sense impressions, too many narratives to pursue and complete. Today was Friday: the end of a week of mild illness. Lizzete's pace was brisk. To keep up, Marco didn't jog or trot but walked and ran, walked and ran.

They approached PriceSlash. This was the first shop Lizzete aimed to visit. Gina had called her up the night before. Friday was her day off and she wanted a little peace: a working mum. She offered Lizzete the usual truancy bonus as well as the flat rate for three hours with Marco. But Lizzete was planning to play hooky anyhow, and get some shopping done.The truancy bonus she had fair-mindedly waived.

She looked down at him. He looked up at her. She said,

"All right? You've got a Megabar coming your way."

13 was watching them from the confines of the orange van, which was currently impeding access to Lancaster Road. He looked completely sick. Not like he looked after a night at the Paradox or on the M25. Being black, he couldn't look green, or gray, or white as a ghost. He just looked completely sick.

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"The thing with plagiarism is," said Richard, "—it always comes out. It's just a matter of time. And that's why I came to you. You know what a novel is. And how much a novel can matter."

This was news to Rory Plantagenet. Agreeable news, on the whole. He was Richard's age. After nights out during which he had attended three or more parties, Rory often found himself wondering about his place in the larger scheme of things.

Richard said, "I want to control all this. Damage limitation. The one I feel sorry for," he added, briefly pondering the wisdom of that third gin-and-tonic, "is Lady Demi. Considering everything else she has to put up with."

"Women?"

"Don't ask me. Ask Audra Christenberry. Ask Mercedes Soroya. You know he even has a . . . But that's another story. Look. The last thing I want to do is make this any worse for Gwyn than it has to be. He's my oldest friend for Christ's sake. I fucking love the guy."

Marco's godfather, and the object of Richard's love, was also but a block distant. Gwyn was walking west up Ladbroke Grove. He had not informed Phil of this excursion. Actually, it wouldn't have been Phil anyway, so early in the afternoon. It would have been Simon. Boldly he walked on, past the tube station, past Mick's Fish Bar, past Westway. If anything was going to happen, it would surely happen under Westway. That black cavity, where the very walls and pillars were drenched in eel juice and snake's hiss, and tattooed with graffiti. If something was going to happen, it would surely happen under Westway. But nothing was going to happen. Gwyn was clear.

The night before, Phil had told him, in the kitchen (Simon and Jake were also present, tacit, collusive, sloped over their Gold Blends), that all this "nonsense," all this recent "rubbish," all this "silly-buggers," would presently be "sorted." Presently: like tomorrow. "Who is he?" said Gwyn. "What are you going to do about him?" From Phil, a quick shake of the head and a downward glance; but Jake, without raising his crushed, Rugby League face from his coffee mug, simply said, "You don't want to know." And Gywn didn't want to know. Gwyn was clear. The universe loved him again. He was clear. He walked on.

When he reached the turning into Calchalk Street he paused and then entered the Adam and Eve. His expression was timid, tolerant, with anthropologist's protuberance of eye. And his voice sounded more Welsh than usual when he ordered his drink . . . Barry would often stroll

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"Who is this Tad Green?" said Rory Plantagenet.

"Thad Green. Thaddeus, presumably: American. I can't find any record of him anywhere. The publisher's long defunct. Which all figures. Oh I think we can trust friend Barry to have thought this through pretty thoroughly. He's not going to claim he wrote Hamlet."

"It seems so out of character. From what I know."

"Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief. Taffy came to my house--"

"This isn't some kind of hoax, is it? I've got a sixth sense about these things. When I'm being used."

"I swear on my wife and kids. Come on. Don't you see how hard this is—for me? We shared rooms at Oxford. I love that fucking guy."

"Well the more I think about it, the more I think that Smatt will want to whale on this," said Rory—Smatt being the office nickname for his editor (a Cumberland cruiserweight called Sir Matthew Druitt). "It's perfect for him."

"Why, particularly?"

"Because Gwyn's Labour. And Welsh. Let's get on to the women."

When the bill had been called for Richard left the table and made for the pay phone. Rory wanted to inspect Stumbling on Melons and take it away for the weekend; he would read it, alongside Amelior and, if everything panned out, he would splash on Monday—the same morning, the same bright dawn that would see the publication of Amelior Regained. Richard had his head bowed over a palmful of change. It was his intention to warn Gina that he would be stopping by. That afternoon he was due—was overdue—at the Tantalus Press.

He dialed his own number.

At C! Calchalk Street, Flat E, Gina was sitting naked in the bath, her hair all gray and greased with some glutinous unguent or elixir. She stopped her ears with her forefingertips, and lay back. Only her breasts and her caligulan nose were visible in the steam.

Next door, the telephone started ringing. It rang and rang and rang. It stopped ringing.

Gina's head and torso surged up from the water.

Space-time was not on Richard's side. The universe was definitely through with him.

Gwyn came out of the Adam and Eve and walked down Calchalk Street.

Although his work conjured up an idealized vision of humankind, he

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"I didn't do it for money. I did it for revenge."

"Oh yes. Poor Anstice. I met her once. Unbelievable."

"I'm surprised he hasn't guessed already. I always told him I'd do the worst thing."

"Ah but he thinks you don't like me."

"I don't."

He turned his head away. And he actually said it. He said: "Women!" He sighed again. Then he reached for his wallet and produced four notes of high denomination. "Nevertheless money was involved. I like to think of myself as Richard's patron. Keeping his family struggling along while he completed his last and, some say, his greatest novel. What was it called?"

"Enough. Stop. Desist."

"Why do you stop? Meaning say. I must say, these days I find his presence . . . entirely soiling. But of course you have this wonderful love life, don't you. This raging sea of hysterical sex. Why don't you just chuck him out? He'd go."

And he would go. With a suitcase, to the callbox . . . He would go *quiet*l. One thing about Richard. She sensed all the violence, all the verbal violence, he contained. But he had never turned it on her. And she knew he never would.

"One last time," said Gwyn. "And just beauty and the beast."

It was naturally the phenomena of his own eye-level that claimed the lion's share of Marco's attention. For example, the cavernous murk beneath the stalls where an apple or a turnip might have rolled: between the gutter and the shadow-edge. The inner glisten of things under there, where he could easily go, bending in under there, where the small was better than the tall.

He looked up. He turned a full circle. 13 was gone. Immediately Marco's ears started humming at him. He wheeled and his vision wheeled, wheeled for a face to form out of the swings and roundabouts, the costumed impostors, the taffetaed dissemblers—the kings and the queens and the jacks.

A bus stood at the crossroads. Behind it, Marco's father, accompanied by his friend, walked past, continuing down Westbourne Park Road to Ladbroke Grove.

"There was this novelist," Richard was saying, "who taught a creative-writing course at Brixton Prison. He went away for six months and when he came back all the lags had written a novel each. Or transcribed a novel each. But there were only about five novels in the prison library for them

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"Need any help with that?"

"It's easier if one person carries it. Funnily enough."

They had drunk more wine than they were young enough to drink; and then there was the large brandy that Richard had successfully consumed while Rory settled the bill. After the thousand-yard hike through the human and mechanical effluvia of Ladbroke Grove, Richard, at least, felt intoxicated to a sordid degree. He paced up the three double flights of stairs, giving stertorous voice to his opinion that there was probably a sequel to Stumbling on Melons and Gwyn had got that off the back of Thad's lorry too . . . He fell sideways, and righted himself. The bikes on the walls, on the ceiling, seemed to strike up an assonance with the oil and metal at the back of his throat. Richard opened the clapboard door: more stairs.

"Everest," said Rory.

Richard pressed on, bouncing from wall to wall with the Hoover tube tightening its grip round his neck; and he was already thinking that suicide had much to be said for it, because life was too much fucking fetching and carrying and too much scrabbling for keys in pockets and too much going from this place to that place and then to some other fucking place . . .

"It'll come out," he said. "It always comes out."

And the shoe will squeak, and the door will creak.

Gwyn heard him. His body stiffened; but his body was stiffening anyway. And do you know what he did? He pressed his hands over Gina's bath-brightened ears. He pressed them good and tight.

What happens when galaxies collide? Most frequently, nothing. Stars are sparser than the conglomerations they form. Galaxy moves through galaxy. Anti-galaxy moves through anti-galaxy. There is plenty of room.

Richard is back on the street. And this story, his story, endeth here. On the street, with its opposed houses, its ranked cars—and the anti-comedy of the apple blossom loosening in the wind.

He turned. He knew that nothing in his past or his future could ever be as inimitably contemptible as the smile he had managed to rig up for Rory Plantagenet: to rig up, among the moonspots and boneshadows of his youthless face. The memory of this smile would be with him until he died; thirty years from now he would be standing there with his hands over his ears, raising his voice in a mortified yodel, trying to batten down the memory of this smile.

How much had Rory seen? He didn't know. How much had Richard seen? He didn't know. The gulping flurry of pink toweling. They had seen enough. Oh, basa . . .

"Well, as you've probably guessed," he said, "we've been leading you down the garden path."

"I don't follow you."

"Yes. Pulling the wool over your eyes." Richard shrugged and opened his hands. A negative hilarity was possessing him. The English language offered him no help—offered him nothing. "It was just a little stunt we hatched. The three of us, you see. To see how far it would go. We wasted your time. There's no story here. I'm sorry. Please forget it, Rory. Forget it. Please, Rory."

Now Gwyn chose to make his exit from 49 Calchalk Street, drooping loosely down the steps with his hands in his pockets: the feminine colors of his clothes. To Richard's eyes he looked cynically and even satanically handsome. Unforgettable, again, was the complicit rictus that Richard now laid at his feet.

"Going my way?" said Gwyn.

And Rory fell into step beside him. And Richard was alone.

As he looked down the vista into which they would soon disappear, toward Ladbroke Grove and its circus horses of traffic, Richard saw his son Marco—Marco a long way away, and on the far side of the street, but

with Marco's unmistakably brittle and defeatist stride. There was something terribly wrong with Marco: there was nobody at his side. And yet the child's solitude, his isolation, unlike his father's, was due to an unforgivable error not his own. There was always somebody at Marco's side. In all his seven years there had always been somebody at his side.

A drama, thought Richard. And a diversion: at least this will get me up the goddamned stairs. He realized that he still had the vacuum cleaner: in his arms, across his body, round his neck. Richard was still Laocoön, engulfed in coils and loops. That too he would have to tote, all the way up to 49E. That too.

Father and son started hurrying toward each other. Marco wasn't crying, but Richard had never seen him looking so unhappy: the unhappiness that was always made for Marco; the unhappiness that was all his own. Richard knelt, like a knight, and held him.

"Who was with you?"

Marco told him: Lizzete.

"And you were lost?"

There was a man.

"Then what happened?"

He took me to a car: for kittens.

"Then what?"

Three men came. And took him away.

"Took him where? Were they police?"

Marco shrugged.

"Did he go willingly or unwillingly?"

Marco shrugged—with out-turned palms.

"What did they say? Did anyone say anything?"

Yes. The man said, "I'm a child."

"The man said you're a child?" And Richard went back four or five years, to the natural confusions of early speech. "How are you?" he would ask him; and Marco would say, logically enough, "You're fine." And Marco would reach out to him with his arms and say, "Carry you." And Richard would pick him up and carry him . . .

No. He said I'm a child.

"But he was't a child."

No. He was a man.

Richard stood up. A definitive misery, having to do with unintended consequences, moved past him, tousling his hair like the backdraft of a speeding car. He turned; and now Lizzete, too, was running down Calchalk Street toward them, running stockily with her waist held low. Jesus: and here came the swine in his German car, ripping down my road

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Beware the aged critic with his hair of winebar sawdust. Beware the nun and the witchy buckles of her shoes. Beware the man at the callbox, with the suitcase: this man is you. The planesaw whines, whining for its planesaw mummy. And then there is the information, which is nothing, and comes at night.